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# In God We Trust

by Tom Dybdahl

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Halfway across the world, in places whose names most of us have never heard, there are nuclear weapons aimed at the United States. At any time, someone could give an order to fire those weapons.

Once they were launched, there is nothing we could do to protect ourselves. In less than one hour, millions of Americans would be dead or dying. The entire landscape would be changed; everything familiar to us would be altered forever.

At the same time, scattered around this country, there are nuclear weapons aimed at the Soviet Union. These weapons, too, could be fired at any moment.

Whatever their targets, our bombs would kill millions of Russian civilians—fathers, mothers, and children. The Soviet Union would be destroyed as a functioning society.

We have created a twisted world: a place where people live constantly in fear of annihilation, where the threat of mutual destruction is a fact of daily life. A place where Christians in one country seem willing to destroy fellow Christians because they happen to live in another country.

I believe that we have come to this point, in no small part, because Christians have forgotten who they are. And I believe that if we can begin to remember, there is hope that nuclear holocaust can be avoided.

It is not that we are reluctant to express our opinions about the arms race. We talk easily about the Soviet threat, or discuss whether we have approximate parity with the Russians, or argue about whether deterrence is effective. We're glad to comment on the latest word from the Pentagon or the Kremlin.

Christians, like other citizens, should be informed about what is at stake in the nuclear arms race. There are many difficult questions which invite discussion. Is deterrence morally acceptable? Should we deploy first-strike weapons? What is the best way to negotiate arms reductions? Can we justify spending billions of dollars on weapons when thousands of God's children die every day from starvation and disease?

But we cannot stop with these issues. We must also talk about this matter *as Christians*. When the subject is raised, we need to cut through the rhetoric and ask the crucial question: What is the word from the Lord? When it comes to the arms race, most of us do not take the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom. Rather, we start with the fear of men.

There is no denying that the nuclear arms race has a certain logic to it. Supporters of current U.S. policy usually begin by agreeing that the arms race is abhorrent. Nuclear weapons threaten our very existence, they say. Nobody wants to see 20 million, or 50 million, or 100 million people dead and large sections of our earth destroyed. They wish we didn't have to have nuclear bombs, but we must.

That is the catch. Almost no one admits to

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Tom Dybdahl, who received an M. Div. from the SDA Theological Seminary, works with the Louisiana Coalition on Jails and Prisons. This article is adapted from a presentation on September 16, 1983, Southwestern Adventist College.

craving these weapons; it is someone else who has forced us to possess them. In America, the argument is that we must have nuclear weapons because the Soviet Union has them, and the Soviets are a threat to our freedoms, our personal survival, and even our national survival. If they would get rid of their weapons, then we would get rid of ours. But we can't get rid of ours first, because the Russians can't be trusted. Look what they did to the Korean Air Lines jet. And besides, they are trying to take over the world, and we aren't. (In the U.S.S.R., incidentally, their justifications are the exact opposite of ours.)

I believe that the Russians are indeed a threat to world peace. I don't trust them. Many of the arguments for possessing nuclear weapons are logical. But their logic is not that of the kingdom of God. So I have no arguments here for President Reagan or President Andropov; I have nothing to say about the wisdom of the world. I wish to speak about the arms race simply as a Christian. I wish to speak about the foolishness of the cross.

**I**n chapter one of I Corinthians, Paul wrote these amazing words:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength (I Corinthians 1:18,19; 22-25).<sup>1</sup>

From the very start, the way Jesus lived and died was a problem. His life annoyed the Jewish leaders enormously; the things he did were a constant judgment on the rules and customs of the time. So they seized him, made false accusations, and sentenced him to death. After some political pressure, the Roman governor agreed to carry out this travesty of justice.

Jesus knew that his life was in danger. He

did not want to die, and he knew that he had the force to resist any efforts to take him and harm him. He had his own nuclear arsenal—at least 12 legions of angels who would have rushed to his assistance. But the sinless, powerful Jesus did not resist. He let himself be taken, abused, and finally executed.

No wonder the cross is a scandal. Here is an innocent man—indeed the best man that ever lived—wrongly condemned to die, with the power to free himself. And he doesn't do it.

In an effort to escape this scandal, most Christians have tried to give the cross a very narrow meaning. Jesus let this happen, they say, because he had to die in order to win our salvation. Calvary was primarily a kind of legal transaction. That's why Jesus didn't resist. He surely doesn't mean for us to act the way he did.

Or we turn the cross into a symbol. Crosses are not for dying on anymore; they are for church decoration, or to put on charm bracelets. In fact, the word cross has come to be applied to almost any kind of difficult circumstances.

But Jesus' own words will not let us get away that easily. He calls today, as he did long ago: "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:38). In dying on the cross, Jesus did not simply earn our salvation and reconcile us to God; he showed us how we should deal with our enemies.

Certainly, Jesus did need to die to save fallen man. But it could have happened in a different way, under a thousand different circumstances. Yet God chose this way—God chose Calvary. On the cross he declares that the way to treat one's enemies is not to fight them, but to love them, even if it means dying for them.

Jesus realized that he was in a life and death struggle with evil, and that if he did not kill his enemies, they would kill him. So he made his choice. Jesus reached out to embrace his enemies, and in doing so he embraced the cross.

To human wisdom, of course, it was crazy. But God had something quite dif-

ferent in mind. In dying for his enemies, Jesus made peace.

For He himself is our peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the Cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near (Ephesians 2:14-18).

The Jews prided themselves on being God's special people. The laws and regulations that God had given them through Moses had shaped their culture and national life and made them unique among the nations of the world. They were the Chosen People.

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But instead of sharing their good fortune with other nations and leading them to God, the Jews used their distinctiveness to build barriers. They grew proud of their special status and scorned other nations. The hostility between the Jews and Gentiles grew and deepened.

So it was an especially bitter experience for the Jews to be ruled by the Gentile Romans. They longed for deliverance. Since Jesus was a Jew, and a man with obvious power, they tried to make him king. They wanted him to raise up an army and defeat the Romans. But Jesus would have none of it. He refused to identify with the particular interests of one country, even his native land.

As a result, his own people wanted him dead. His refusal to fight for their cause, his insistence on a new kingdom without barriers, was a judgment on them. The crafty Caiaphas argued that Jesus had to be killed because his actions threatened Israel's very existence. “It is better for you that one man

die for the people,” he said, “than that the whole nation perish” (John 11:50).

But by accepting death, Jesus accomplished his purpose. He swept away the customs and regulations that had built walls between people. He created a new kind of person: one who would seek reconciliation with enemies, not confrontation; one who would love others no matter what it cost. He established a people that would not primarily identify themselves as Jews or Greeks, Americans or Russians, males or females, but as Christians. Jesus knew that was the only way to make peace.

Today we commonly think of peace as the absence of war. By that definition, even though the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are facing each other with enough destructive power to incinerate the world several times over, we are at peace. Many people argue that the arms race has actually helped maintain peace.

But that is not the peace Jesus established. His peace comes only when differences are reconciled; when people are willing to forgive their enemies. Real peace comes only when people are willing to sacrifice their own interests for the interests of others. Jesus did not bring peace by helping the Jews defeat the Romans. He brought peace by dying for them both.

Today we have similar barriers between nations. In particular, there is a deep distrust between America and the Soviet Union, not unlike that between the Jews and Gentiles. Many people, including the president of the U.S. believe that the Soviet Union is the focus of evil in the world, and that, by contrast, the U.S. is the focus of good.

This was exactly the kind of spirit that Jesus wished to destroy on the cross. By refusing to support the national interests of the Jews, he wanted to show that no nation is God's kingdom. His kingdom is made up of people from all nations. The spirit that is willing to destroy people in other countries for the sake of a particular national interest is not the spirit of Jesus, but the spirit of the world. The goal of the Christian is not to

defeat his opponents, but to be reconciled with them.

By dying for his enemies on the cross, Jesus made peace. In today's world, with its giant weapons of destruction, the way to peace is still the same. The real peacemakers are not the presidents, or generals, or defense contractors. The real peacemakers are those men and women who would rather die than harm their enemies.

**B**ut the cross did more than make peace. It also exposed the true nature of the governments of this world. In Ephesians 2, Paul tells us:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and stood opposed to us, he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Ephesians 2:13–15).

Paul here uses three verbs to describe what the cross did to the powers. Jesus disarmed the powers, made a public spectacle of them, and triumphed over them.<sup>2</sup>

The superpowers claim to be interested in disarmament, even as the arms race accelerates. But Paul tells us that Jesus has already disarmed the powers. He did not do this by taking away their weapons; he did it by showing how weak these weapons really were. Jesus submitted to the might of the Roman Empire; he let himself be killed. But when God's voice called him, no force on earth could resist. The only true source of power is the God who holds life and death in his hands.

Nuclear weapons, despite their massive power of destruction, are not truly powerful. They may kill millions, but they cannot defeat a single person who trusts in the crucified Jesus and follows his example. These puny weapons offer no eternal security. Their strength is an illusion. The cross and the resurrection reveal the utter weakness of the bomb, and thus the powers are disarmed.

Similarly, Jesus made a public example of the powers. At the cross, he revealed their

true nature. Prior to this time, gods were usually associated with particular nations. Most people accepted the powers as the gods of this world. These powers were to be obeyed and supported.

But when God appears on the earth in Jesus Christ, it becomes clear that something is wrong with the powers. The Jews, God's special people, the most civilized nation on earth, lead the way in clamoring for his undeserved execution. The Romans, with their highly developed system of criminal justice, add their approval to the charade. These nations join together to crush out the life of Jesus.

By this encounter, they are unmasked as false gods. No more can they be blindly supported or worshipped. When they come up against perfect goodness, all their laws

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are forgotten. They resort to brute force. Whatever face they may pretend to wear, these powers turn out to be God's enemies.

The nations today are no different. We all wish to believe in the goodness of our country. We sometimes even identify our national interests with the eternal interests of God. But since the cross, we know that this is idolatry. All the powers are fallen. They are all at war with God's kingdom.

But Jesus triumphed over the powers. At the cross and resurrection he demonstrated that love is stronger than violence. He showed that death is not necessarily defeat. Jesus rose victorious over the powers and broke their mighty grip on men. And in his victory is the assurance that one day these powers will be destroyed utterly.

People today do not wish to hear about the cross, however. We have grown comfortable with the bomb. We have come to accept the world's argument that it is our only security. We don't want to make any hard choices.

And so we don't. We say that we trust in

God, but we always have a good reason not to let go of our weapons. What about the Russians? What about national survival? Surely God does not want us to be defenseless?

But on the cross, Jesus was not concerned about national defense. He was concerned about being faithful to God's will. And by not choosing, we are making a clear choice. We are denying the cross.

The cross is the great opposite to the bomb. The bomb says we deal with our enemies by force, and if necessary, kill them. The cross says we deal with our enemies by loving them, and if necessary, dying for them. The bomb says peace comes through strength; the cross says that peace comes through forgiveness and reconciliation. The bomb represents the ultimate in human might, the cross represents the power of God. The bomb appeals to our fears; the cross calls us to hope. The bomb brings the possibility of death for all people, the cross brings the possibility of life for all. We simply cannot march under both banners.

In the eyes of the world, anyone who chooses the cross must seem wildly irresponsible. Indeed, there is no telling what might occur if Christians in America renounced the bomb. The Soviets might occupy our country and take away our

freedoms and possibly our lives. Or there might be such a release of God's Spirit that the forces of evil might be temporarily pushed back. I don't know what would happen.

But I am sure of two things. First, whatever happened would be victory. Jesus insisted on loving his enemies until they killed him. But God turned that faithful death into a triumph.

The same treatment may await Jesus' followers. We should have no illusions that loving our enemies will automatically transform them into friends, or that if we lay down our weapons others will do the same. Choosing the cross may lead to crucifixion. But not even death can separate us from God's love and the promise of resurrection. The biggest threat to our Christian life is not that we might be forced to live in a totalitarian society, or even that we might be killed, but that we might fall away from our Lord.

Second, I do know that our actions would bear a tremendous witness. If we could show the world a new kind of community where men and women reach out to their enemies, where differences are reconciled, where people live with hope, they might believe that God's Spirit is among us. They might believe that Jesus really can create new

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people. If Christians really began to act like Christ, there might be many in the world who would want to join us.

In the early days of Christianity, Roman rulers did not demand that Christians give up their faith. They asked only that they offer some recognition to the emperor and his gods—a pinch of incense now and then, a nod when they passed a roadside shrine. Such minimal homage was considered one's civic duty, an act of patriotism.

But the Christians would have nothing to do with these rituals. They would not even go through the motions of acknowledging Roman gods. In fact, they came to be called atheists and were considered a threat to society.

We have come a long way since then. Most Christians are good citizens. We have no qualms now about acknowledging our national gods. We give them our money, our votes, our tacit approval.

In this dangerous world, filled with weapons of mass destruction and leaders with evil intentions, it is not easy to put our faith in the One who went to Calvary. When we feel threatened, it isn't easy to rely on the One who prayed for his killers.

But we must decide whether we will trust in nuclear weapons or in Christ and we cannot take up the cross until we lay down the bomb.

The world asks us to trust in the bomb, with its awesome power of death. Our leaders tell us that the arms race is the road to security. And so, fearful and confused, most of us betray the Lord and place our faith in these weapons.

In the midst of our struggle, Jesus still calls us to trust in his cross. Jesus does not promise safety or security. But He does promise victory. Christians know that the Lamb who was slain has already begun his reign.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. All scripture quotations are from the New International Version, New York International Bible Society, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan), 1978.

2. For much of the material in this section I am indebted to Hendrick Berkhof's *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962). Tom Dybdahl,

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