

Summary for Christian Morality in the Use of Force: Means, Methods, and Motives in Law of War (May 22, 2026)

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Key Outcomes

Bill Cavan provided comprehensive training on the Law of War (LoW) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), demonstrating how Christian ethics align with modern military legal frameworks. The session equipped military chaplains and leaders worldwide with principles for ethical decision-making in combat, emphasizing that commanders must prepare moral frameworks before battlefield decisions because "you have 3 seconds" to act in combat—one to understand, two to decide, three to execute—but those decisions require 30 years of preparation.

Foundational Principles

Law of War Framework

- **Two primary branches:** *Jus ad Bellum* (when to go to war) and *Jus in Bello* (conduct during war)
- **Modern foundation:** UN Charter Article 2(4) made offensive war illegal; only self-defense (Article 51) and UN Security Council Chapter 7 actions remain lawful
- **Anticipatory self-defense:** Evolved as practical necessity when waiting for attack would be catastrophic; U.S. requires this justification rather than "retaliation"
- **Historical development:** From St. Augustine's letters to General Boniface (400 AD) through Hugo Grotius (17th century) to Geneva Conventions (1949)

Core Combat Principles

Military Necessity

- Justifies only measures needed to defeat enemy quickly and efficiently
- Does not permit actions unnecessary for legitimate military objectives

Humanity and Subordinate Principles

- **Unnecessary suffering:** Weapons must not cause suffering beyond military purpose
- **Distinction:** Must distinguish between combatants and civilians; autonomous weapons raise critical questions about human decision-making
- **Proportionality:** Civilian casualties/damage cannot be excessive relative to concrete military advantage; this is the primary war crime concern for advanced militaries

Practical Applications

Combatant Status Issues

- **Unprivileged belligerents:** Civilians who take up arms (e.g., Taliban, Al-Qaeda) can be targeted but lack "belligerent privilege" to kill lawfully; subject to prosecution for murder
- **Guantanamo context:** Detainees classified as "unlawful combatants" rather than POWs because they didn't meet Geneva Convention requirements for lawful combatant status
- **Geneva Conventions:** Four separate conventions protect wounded, shipwrecked, POWs, and civilians—always plural, not "the Geneva Convention"

Modern Warfare Challenges

Proportionality and Precision Weapons

- Expensive precision weapons can distinguish targets better than "dumb bombs"
- Debate: Does IHL require wealthy nations to use costlier precision munitions to minimize collateral damage?
- ICC Elements of Crimes uses "expected," "clearly excessive," and "overall military advantage" to raise prosecution threshold and protect legitimate commanders

Autonomous Weapons

- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) identifies this as primary current concern
- Paradox: AI may apply distinction principle better than humans with limited battlefield information
- Command responsibility question: Who is accountable when autonomous systems make targeting decisions?

Ethical Framework for Christian Warriors

Biblical Foundations

- Scripture supports both pacifism and warrior vocations depending on God's calling to individuals
- Key principle: "Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him" (1 Corinthians 7:17)
- Military service as legitimate calling: Roman centurion as first Gentile believer; King Uzziah's military innovations praised

Reconciling Faith and Law

- **Common morality:** C.S. Lewis's observation that universal right/wrong reflects *Imago Dei*—all humans made in God's image recognize core ethical truths 26
- **International law value:** Developed through deliberation, not in heat of temptation; reflects thoughtful moral reasoning Christians can trust
- **Hypocrisy observation:** "Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue"—violations acknowledge the norm's validity
- **Objective morality exists across cultures:** Law of War principles apply universally, not just to U.S. interests

Preparation Over Reaction

Commanders cannot make ethical decisions in 3-second combat windows without decades of prior moral preparation. This requires:

- Studying principles beforehand in deliberative contexts
- Wrestling with conscience before God over hypothetical scenarios
- Distinguishing military necessity from political expediency or utility
- Maintaining loyalty to universal good over narrow organizational loyalty

Addressing Islamic Art of War

Key Differences

Rick Jackson raised concerns about Islamic warfare concepts (*taqiyya*, targeting civilians) differing fundamentally from Western LoW. Bill's response:

- Islamic countries have signed Geneva Conventions, creating reciprocity obligations
- **Common Article 3** requires humane treatment even when adversaries aren't treaty parties
- Christian approach: "We stick to our principles and recognize we can still beat you while limiting ourselves more than you limit yourselves"
- Historical parallel: Christianity spread most during martyrdom, not Crusades

Practical Challenges

- **Lying and deception:** Experienced firsthand in treaty negotiations; Islamic negotiator acknowledged lying to "infidel" was permissible
- **Human Rights declarations:** Muslim countries signed with "in accordance with the Quran" provisos, interpreted as applying only to Muslims
- **Reprisal doctrine:** Historical right to reciprocate violations has largely disappeared; reflects Christian "love your enemy" principle without allowing conquest

Application to Diverse Contexts

Mongolian Military Transformation

Rick Jackson reported Mongolian Military Christian Fellowship teaching biblical military ethics to help transition from Russian to Western ethical frameworks. Leadership requested presentations at bases; instructors cannot explicitly cite biblical sources during official presentations but offer follow-up for interested personnel.

African Military Leadership Development

Cal noted five to six African military interns participated in the call 29. Jeff confirmed this presentation, transcript, and slides will become lesson plan materials for ongoing African intern training programs, available on the Axe website.

Universal Principles

Bill emphasized these are not "U.S. principles" but biblical principles applicable globally. The goal is ensuring norms reflect appropriate biblical values and "are good" rather than merely "look good"—Lincoln's distinction between character (the tree) and reputation (the shadow).

Pending Confirmation

- **Force-feeding at Guantanamo:** ICRC officially opposed but privately encouraged U.S. to continue because detainees secretly requested it while publicly claiming starvation under Al-Qaeda orders.
- **Tracer round treaty:** Country admitted supporting ICRC proposal to ban tracers while planning to oppose only until U.S. objected, then withdraw—example of norm-creation hypocrisy.

Key Resources

- **Foundational documents:** UN Charter (1945), Geneva Conventions (1949), Hague Regulations, Rome Statute/ICC Elements of Crimes
- **U.S. not party to:** Ottawa Convention (landmines), Protocols to Geneva Conventions, Rome Statute (though joined consensus on Elements of Crimes)
- **Historical texts:** Augustine's letters to Boniface, Aquinas on just war, Lieber Code (first written U.S. military law).

Closing Encouragement

Bill's final guidance to international participants and young leaders: "The believer just needs to be on his knees all the time, seeking God's guidance as he makes all these decisions, hopefully having thought through some of these things before." 49 These universal principles exist to help warriors prepare consciences before facing split-second decisions with lifelong consequences.