Related article:

A declaration of war … and peace
(page 24)

Living Lutheran
Summer 2026

Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to **rcblezard@embarqmail.com**

Study guide

A declaration of war … and peace

By Robert C. Blezard

The ongoing wars in Iran, Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere have sparked debate over whether the violence in those conflicts is reasonable, fair, proportionate and necessary to accomplish an outcome to advance the greater good. In other words, that they are "just wars." Scholars and theologians have debated the just war theory for centuries. What does it mean for us as followers of Jesus?

Exercise 1: Blessed peacemakers

Jesus declares, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). From Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, this beatitude is one of the most familiar Christian teachings. Whenever Christians debate justification for violence, this teaching helps direct the conversation. Discuss:

- What is peace? What conditions would you say constitute peace?
- Why is peace more than simply the absence of violence?
- Why is there no peace if there is a constant threat of violence?
- Can peace exist without justice in law, economics, social standing? Why or why not?
- Can peace exist amid political, economic or social oppression? Why or why not?
- What would "holistic peace" look like?

Reflect on the task of peacemaking:

- Why does Jesus bless peacemakers and call them "children of God"?
- What factors make peacemaking complicated, and why?

Talk about the many dimensions of peacemaking:

- What are the risks of peacemaking?
- Why can there never be a one-size-fits-all definition of peacemaking? Or a one size fits all playbook for peacemaking?
- Under what conditions might peacemaking necessarily employ violent means? Why would that be justified?

Exercise 2: "Necessary evil"

Jimmy Carter (1924-2024) frequently talked publicly about his Baptist faith and famously taught Sunday school. Carter's peacemaking efforts before and after his presidency (1977-1981) earned him the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize. Accepting the

award, he commented, "War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good." Discuss:

- What is the difference between a "necessary war" and an "unnecessary war"?
- Under what circumstances is war sometimes necessary? Can you think of examples of necessary wars? What made them necessary? What were the consequences?
- Under what circumstances could a war be described as unnecessary? Can you think of examples? What made them unnecessary? What were the consequences?
- What makes a war "evil"?
- Reflecting on a current or former war, what were the consequences on armed combatants, civilians, private property, public infrastructure, government spending priorities and national identity? Do any of those things make war evil? Why or why not?
- Reflecting on a past war, describe the path of rebuilding and getting back to a sense of normal for the "losing" country. What were the struggles? How long did it take? What did it take in money and material? Did the new normal differ much from the old normal? Explain.
- Do you agree with Carter that however necessary, war is always an evil, never a good? Explain.
- What historical wars might be seen as "good"? Why were they so characterized? Despite that, what were the wars' impacts on servicepeople, civilians, and private and public property?
- Immediately following his comment about the evil of war, Carter said, "We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children." What's true about this statement?

Exercise 3: Just war principles

The just war theory involves principles that would determine whether a war is justified. Though details and nuances are many, the theory says that to be a just war, it must:

- Use force only as a last resort.
- Have expected benefits outweighing costs.
- Be declared openly by a sovereign authority.
- Have a just cause, such as defense.
- Not be waged for self-interest or gain.
- Aim to establish a just peace.
- Have a reasonable chance of success.

Discuss:

- Do these principles seem reasonable to you? Why or why not?

Contact us:

Living Lutheran
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

ELCA

- How would you rank these from most important to least important? Explain.
- Must a war meet all of these criteria in order to be just? Why or why not?
- Based on just war criteria, how would you evaluate these past wars: the American Civil War, World War I, World War II and the Vietnam War?
- When you look at current (2026) wars, how do they stack up: the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, between Ukraine and Russia, between Iran and the United States and Israel?

Exercise 4: "Just peacemaking"

Counterbalancing just war theory, Glen Stassen (1936-2014), a Baptist theologian and ethicist, was among scholars proposing a preemptive "just peacemaking theory" that would work to prevent war. In "The Just War Theory of Peacemaking" *(Journal of Lutheran Ethics,* June 2005), Stassen suggested 10 practices:

1. Commit to nonviolent direct action.
2. Create independent initiatives to reduce threat.
3. Promote cooperative conflict resolution
4. Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness.
5. Advance democracy, human rights and religious liberty.
6. Foster just and sustainable economic development.
7. Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system.
8. Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights.
9. Reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade.
10. Encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and other voluntary associations.

Discuss:

- What do you see as practical and possible in these practices?
- To what degree and how are these practices already in place in the world? How well are they working? How could they work better?
- Given that the costs of war are so devastating to so many people, would the costs of just peacemaking be worth it?
- Hypothetically, what might be the impact if the United States created a "Department of Peace" alongside the "Department of War," gave it adequate resources and created a cabinet-level position of "secretary of peace?"

Contact us:

Living Lutheran
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

ELCA

Exercise 5: Pope Leo's criticism

The first American pontiff, Pope Leo, has been critical of the United States for its war against Iran and for remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth suggesting that God approves of the action and is on the side of the United States. In his Palm Sunday homily, Pope Leo said God rejects the prayers of "those who wage war," and that their "hands are full of blood."

The conflict of ideas has led some in the Trump administration to criticize Pope Leo. Vice President JD Vance said, "In some cases it would be best for the Vatican to stick to matters of morality." President Donald Trump said Pope Leo was "weak on crime."

Pope Leo unpacked some of his thoughts about war and peace in his May 26, 2026, encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* (Magnificent Humanity). In it, Pope Leo decried the growing shift away from the peacemaking and war-prevention emphasis that the world's nations adopted after World War II.

"We are witnessing a real paradigm shift in public discourse and in decisions regarding rearmament, with a troubling revival of war as an instrument of international politics," he writes. The shift is caused by a complex mix of problems, including memories fading of the horrors of World War II; media that profit by promoting conflict, disinformation, black-and-white thinking and simplistic narratives; and the economic and political influence of the military-industrial complex.

In the encyclical, Pope Leo said the just war theory, which "has all too often been used to justify any kind of war," is outdated. "Humanity possesses far more effective and capable tools for promoting human life and resolving conflicts, such as dialogue, diplomacy and forgiveness. The use of force, violence and weapons reflects a relational poverty that always has disastrous consequences for civilian populations."

The pope calls for Christians to speak out against violence and war and work for peace by:

- Naming as evil our "world in a state of perpetual conflict."
- Disarming words and communicating calmly.
- Building peace through justice.
- Adopting the perspective of victims.
- Cultivating a healthy realism that avoids political idealism and cynicism.
- Reviving dialogue, not only between nations but also in daily discourse.
- Embracing diplomacy and multilateralism.
- Praying and hoping.

(For further study, read *Magnifica Humanitas* at **vatican.va**.

Discuss:

- Is it appropriate for the leader of the world's largest body of Christians to express opinions about a world issue? Why or why not?

Contact us:

Living Lutheran
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

ELCA

About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard is a retired ELCA pastor. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.

Contact us:

Living Lutheran
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

ELCA

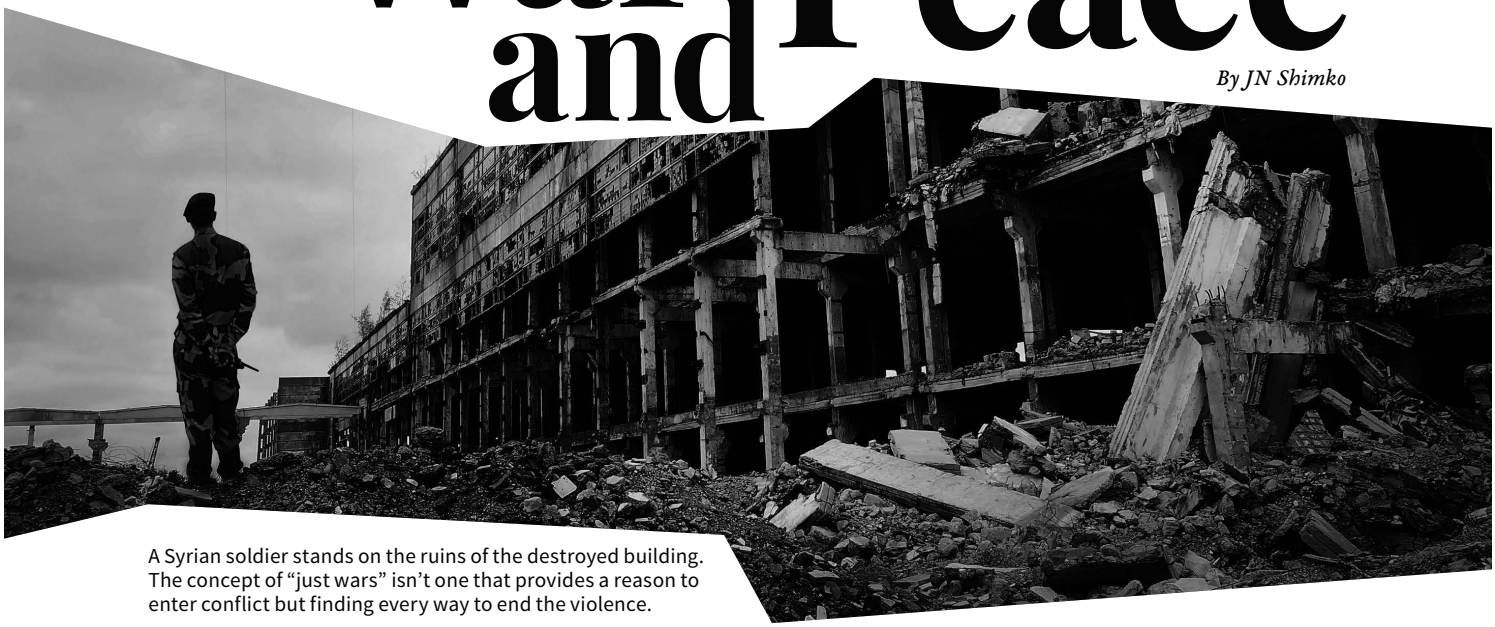
- Is the morality or justness of a war fair game for any leader to talk about? Explain.
- Was Pope Leo wrong to criticize the United States and Israel for the war in Iran? Why or why not?
- Do you agree or disagree with Pope Leo that our world is trending toward normalization of war and away from peacemaking?
- As Christians who are also patriotic citizens of the United States, how can we work for peace while being loyal to our country?
- Which of Pope Leo's suggestions for peacemaking do you like the most? Find most workable? Can put into action in your life? In the life of your congregation? How? Come up with specific action steps.

Discussion questions

- In Matthew 5, Jesus blesses the peacemakers as children of God (9), teaches us to not resist an evildoer (39), and instructs us to love and pray for our enemies (44). How can we reconcile these teachings with the belief that war and violence are sometimes necessary? How do these teachings help us to be careful, thoughtful and prayerful whenever advocating and executing war?
- When it comes to armed conflict, can God ever support one side or the other? Explain. What are the dangers of declaring that God supports any country's military operation? Do wars always have a "good side" and a "bad side"? Can God ever truly be on the side of the "bad guy" or aggressor? On the side of the victim? Explain.
- When it comes to deciding whether to support the United States' wars, why are many Christians torn between the teachings of their faith and their patriotism? What is the source of this tension? How can a Christian navigate this minefield? What's the right way to think about the issue?
- Discuss how, in our daily lives and relationships, we can be peacemakers. What are some specific practices we can undertake to promote peace? By contrast, the world often encourages us to be troublemakers. What are some specific troublemaking habits or practices that can lead to unrest and disharmony? How do these practices play out in the global sphere?
- Do you agree with Pope Leo that war and conflict are becoming normalized, even as the structures for peacemaking and peacekeeping are being destroyed? Why or why not? What could or should we do about it?

A Declaration of War and Peace

By JN Shimko



A Syrian soldier stands on the ruins of the destroyed building. The concept of "just wars" isn't one that provides a reason to enter conflict but finding every way to end the violence.

On Feb. 28, the United States, in coordination with Israel, launched a bombing campaign against Iran, kicking off a series of debates about the justification for war. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth asserted that, in this conflict against a Muslim-majority nation, God was on the American side and that everyone in the nation should be praying for victory in battle "every day on bended knee with your family, in your schools, in your churches, in the name of Jesus Christ."

Others in the administration offered similar comments, including President Donald Trump, who promised on April 7 that "a whole civilization [would] die tonight" if Iran failed to meet U.S. demands. Pope Leo XIV soon after spoke out against violence, though he did not name the president or the war itself.

"Anyone who is a disciple of Christ, the Prince of Peace, is never on the side of those who once wielded the sword and today drop bombs," the Catholic pontiff said. This resulted in a widely reported debate among pundits, leaders and others about whether the war was just or appropriate. Lost in the conversation, though, was the actual meaning of the phrase "just war."

"Just war was never about easing our consciences about war," said Ryan Cumming, director for theological ethics at the ELCA churchwide office. "It's about wrestling with challenging questions of justice and having a language for talking about when war is justified and when it is not."

The Christian concept of a just war is often claimed to originate with fourth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo, though his inspiration came from both Christian and non-Christian thinkers, such as Cicero and Ambrose. His work focused on the fate of the Roman Empire amid large-scale internal and external conflicts.

Augustine viewed war as a tragic exception, a necessary evil. Conflict was not a means to an end but rather something that must be waged in love, particularly the love of the enemy. The other component of Augustine's views on war surrounded the reality that no war could result in perfect peace. In other words, he saw that justice demands that political rulers avoid war unless it is necessary to stop a clear, unavoidable threat. But even then, the objective was not to destroy an enemy but to end the conflict.

One of the valuable insights from Augustine, Cumming said, is the tension of discerning justice in an imperfect world. "Augustine's thought on war is about this tension between government's duty to oppose the chaotic forces of injustice with the aim of promoting a just peace and a sense of humility that recognizes that no peace brokered by human efforts can grant permanent security and true justice," he said.

For centuries after Augustine, writers amended the theory, changing what makes a war justified, who has the authority to declare war, what makes a cause worthy of violence, and how evil should be determined. But where they continued to agree was that wars waged in the name of God or religion were unjust.

"Holy war has never been acceptable in 'just war' theory," Cumming said. "When we start believing God is on our side, or we are fighting in the name of Christ, we have moved completely away from the history of 'just war' theory."

Photo: iStock.com/Diy13

The significant changes in the theory that led to the modern version occurred in two distinct eras. First, Thomas Aquinas wrote that political leaders could lose their legitimacy when they acted in their own interests rather than for the common good. Later, Spanish theologian Francisco de Vitoria took Aquinas' argument a step further, arguing that leaving war to the decision of a political authority alone could lead to poor decisions, especially since rulers were more likely to act out of greed or selfishness. Another Spanish theologian, Francisco Suárez, agreed, arguing that public counsel should guide decisions about war.

"Suárez and Vitoria were responding to real atrocities," Cumming said. "They insisted that rulers don't get to declare war simply because they can."

Early Lutherans did not deviate from the tradition of just war but instead embraced it. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession affirms that civil authority can be a legitimate calling and civil authorities can appropriately wage just wars, though this has often been misinterpreted as requiring uncritical obedience and support for the war-waging authority of government. Martin Luther was especially critical of political authorities regarding war.

"It is not right to start a war just because some silly lord has gotten the idea into his head," Luther wrote.

After the 1600s, just war theory didn't experience much significant development. "For a long time, 'just war' functioned as background moral consensus," Cumming said. "It wasn't examined deeply. It was assumed."

That assumption fractured in the 20th century amid two world wars, the use of chemical weapons in the first and atomic weapons in the second, and the reasoning behind both conflicts, as well as the Holocaust. Christians were now forced to consider the frameworks that defined what constituted a just war. World War I led to a shift in the discussion, from whether a war should start, to questions about how it should be waged, how to treat civilians caught in the crossfire, and whether a military response is proportionate to the original attack.

Adding to the conversation were the ideas of "military actions" that fell outside the standard definition of war, humanitarian interventions such as the NATO bombing during the Kosovo War in 1999, and, now, "preventative wars."

The ELCA's 1995 social statement, "For Peace in God's World," affirms just war theory as a moral framework and urges governments to "vigorously pursue less coercive measures over more coercive ones: consent over compulsion, nonviolence over violence, diplomacy over military engagement, and deterrence over war."

Lutheran ethicists have increasingly emphasized that "just war" theory is primarily a call to peacemaking rather than a quick way to justify violence. Writing in the Journal of Lutheran Ethics (JLE), ethicists argue that political power exists to serve peace. Any moral analysis must extend beyond battlefield decisions to the social, political and economic dynamics that led to war in the first place.

Others have called for revising the vocabulary behind "just war" theory altogether. In the JLE essay "A New Language for Just War," Wollom A. Jensen argues that traditional moral frameworks for war are often too narrow to address modern warfare or the spiritual wounds it leaves behind. He urges the church to speak honestly not only about justification but about trauma, moral injury and the repercussions of violence.

For Cumming, the most faithful role of just war theory is not to provide certainty but to cultivate humility.

"The decision to go to war should always be a mournful one. There are times when we have to wage war, but we never enter it with triumphalism. We enter it, wage it, and end it with grief and mourning." †

Download a study guide for this article by searching for "A study guide for "A Declaration of war and peace" at **livinglutheran.org**.