THE QUESTION

What did the early Christians believe about war?

Asked by a THF member on April 13, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 10 numbered quotations · the 14 early Christian passages and 71 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-the-early-christians-believe-about-war

The short answer *From the text: says what the passages say*

The early Christian writers here mostly taught that Christians should not fight in wars. They read Christ's words to Peter and the prophecy of swords beaten into plows as a call to peace. They told believers to love enemies, refuse revenge, and treat their real warfare as faithful suffering for Christ.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 8

Tertullian asks if warfare suits Christians at all

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian does not start with small details about soldiers' customs. He asks the bigger question first: is war itself right for a Christian? He points to the Lord's warning that those who take the sword will die by it, and he asks how a 'son of peace' could fight in battle.

1

"To begin with the real issue of the military crown, I think we must first ask whether warfare itself is proper at all for Christians."

later in the same passage

"Should it be considered lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord declares that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And should the son of peace take part in battle, when it does not become him even to sue at law?"

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Corona* 11 **Source 5, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
(c. 196–220 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

When Christ disarmed Peter, he disarmed soldiers

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

In another work Tertullian admits some people asked whether soldiers could become believers, and he knows soldiers came to John the Baptist. Still, he reads Jesus telling Peter to put away his sword as a rule for every Christian. He says a believer cannot serve two masters, God and Caesar.

2

"One soul cannot be due to two masters, God and Caesar."

later in the same passage

"But how will a Christian man wage war? No, how will he even serve in peace without a sword, which the Lord has taken away?"

later in the same passage

"Although soldiers had come to John and had received his instruction for their conduct, and although a centurion had likewise believed, still afterward the Lord, in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Idolatry* 19 **Source 6, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
(c. 196–220 AD)
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 8

Justin saw Isaiah's peace prophecy coming true

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Justin quotes Isaiah's promise that nations will beat swords into plows and stop learning war. He says this was already happening in the church. People who once killed each other now refused to fight their enemies, and they were even willing to die rather than deny Christ.

3

> "And He shall judge among the nations and shall rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.""
>
> *later in the same passage*
>
> "We who once killed one another not only refrain from warring against our enemies, but we also willingly die confessing Christ, so we won't lie or deceive our judges."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Justin Martyr,** *First Apology* (c. 130–165 AD) **Source 3, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 8

Origen says Christians would not make war

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Answering a pagan critic, Origen describes Christians as people taught not to take revenge. He says they would not go to war even if they had the power and permission to do it. Instead, he says, God has fought for them and protected them.

4

> "But with regard to the Christians, because they were taught not to take revenge on their enemies, and have thus followed laws of a mild and philanthropic kind, and because they would not, although able, have made war even if they had received authority to do so, they have received this reward from God: He has always fought on their behalf, and at certain times has held back those who rose up against them and wanted to destroy them."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *Against Celsus* 8 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 8, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
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POINT 5 OF 8

Christians were taught to love their enemies

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

The church rule book repeats Jesus' teaching to bless those who curse us and to turn the other cheek. It says that if we love those who hate us, we will have no enemy. The letter to Diognetus says the same thing about how Christians actually lived.

5

"Bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you."

later in the same passage

"But love those who hate you, and you will have no enemy."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 11, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

6

"The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and loves the members; Christians likewise love those that hate them."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 1, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

Clergy could not also serve in the army

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

The Apostolic Constitutions set a firm rule for church leaders. A bishop, priest, or deacon who joined the army and tried to keep both jobs was to be removed from office. The rule rests on Jesus' saying about giving Caesar and God what belongs to each.

7

"If a bishop, presbyter, or deacon enters the army and wants to keep both service under the Roman government and his priestly ministry, let him be removed from office."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 12, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

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POINT 7 OF 8

The Christian's real battle is faithful suffering

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Cyprian uses war language, but not for fighting people. He says Christians enlisted in a war where Christ walked first, the war of humility, patience, and suffering under persecution. Ignatius likewise borrows Paul's picture of a soldier who stays free of worldly business to please the one who chose him.

8 “For we have not enlisted in warfare in such a way that we should think only about peace and draw back from war or refuse it, when in this very warfare the Lord Himself walked first—the Teacher of humility, endurance, and suffering.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 9, page 7 Read it in the library ›

9 “No one involved in military service entangles himself with the affairs of this life, so he may please the one who chose him to be a soldier; and if a person competes for success, he is not crowned unless he competes lawfully.”"

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistles of Ignatius* (c. 98–117 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 2, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 8 OF 8

Lactantius warns even watching killing stains the soul

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Lactantius writes about the deadly public games, not about war itself. Still, he shows how seriously Christians took human life. He says that someone who enjoys watching even a guilty man be killed shares in the guilt of murder.

10 “For the man who counts it a pleasure that a man, though justly condemned, should be killed in his sight, pollutes his conscience as much as if he were both a spectator of and a partner in a murder committed in secret.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 20 (c. 290–320 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 14, page 7 Read it in the library ›

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THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not settle whether every Christian soldier had to leave the army; Tertullian shows that question was still being asked.
- They speak mainly about what Christians themselves should do, not about whether a nation or ruler may ever go to war.
- Several writers use war only as a picture of the spiritual struggle, so not every war word here is about real fighting.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 14 early Christian passages and 71 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–14, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 15–60, in Bible order), then 25 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *14 passages from 10 writers*

Mathetes, *c. 80–200 AD · source 1*

1 *Epistle to Diognetus* **Quote 6, page 4** sum up everything in one word—what the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. The soul is spread throughout all the members of the body… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · source 2*

2 *Epistles of Ignatius* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 5** “man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · source 3*

3 *First Apology* **Quote 3, page 3** “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · source 4*

4 *Exhortation to the Heathen* 10 (1885 English) “knowledge taken hold of you while engaged in military service… [continues online] **read ›**

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Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 5–6*

5 *De Corona* 11 **Quote 1, page 2** “of the military crown, I think we must first ask whether warfare itself is proper at all for Christians. What is the point of discussing what is merely secondary, when… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *On Idolatry* 19 (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** “now inquiry is made about this point, whether a believer may turn himself unto military service, and whether the military may be admitted unto the faith, even the rank and… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 7–8*

7 *Against Celsus* 33 (on point 4) “we no longer take up sword against nation, nor do we learn… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Against Celsus* 8 **Quote 4, page 3** “with regard to the Christians, because they were taught not… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 9–10*

9 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 5** “we have not in such a way given our name to warfare that we ought only to think about peace and draw back from and refuse war, when in this… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 7) “even more strongly the Holy Spirit, teaching and showing that the army of the devil is not to be feared, and that, if the foe should declare war against us… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 11–12*

11 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 5, page 4** “is, you shall not destroy a man like yourself, for you destroy what was well made. Not as if all killing were wicked, but only the killing of the innocent… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** “Let a bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, who goes to the army, and desires to retain both the Roman government and the sacerdotal administration, be deprived… [continues online] **read ›**

Arnobius, *c. 290–330 AD · source 13*

13 *Against the Heathen* 6 (1885 English) “take no part in the slaughter of war and devastation of cities… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · source 14*

14 *Divine Institutes* 20 (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** “it will be neither lawful for a just man to engage in warfare, since his warfare is justice itself, nor to accuse any one of a capital charge, because it… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *46 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

15 **Exodus 20:15** You shall not steal. (Septuagint Exodus 20:14 (Exodus 20:15 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

16 **Numbers 32:27** but your servants will all cross over, armed and drawn up before the Lord for war, as our lord says.” **read ›**

17 **Deuteronomy 20:10** And if you draw near to a city to fight against them, invite them to come out in peace. **read ›**

18 **1 Chronicles 5:22** For many fell slain, because the war was from God. And they lived in their place until the exile. **read ›**

19 **Esther 8:11** in which he commanded them to use their own laws in every city, and to come to their own aid, and to deal with their opponents and those who attacked them as they wished, **read ›**

20 **Proverbs 3:19** God by wisdom founded the earth, and by sound judgment he prepared the heavens. **read ›**

21 **Proverbs 5:19** Let your loving deer and your graceful colt keep company with you, and let your own lead you and be with you at all times; for, carried along in her love, you will be greatly increased. **read ›**

22 **Proverbs 8:26** The Lord made the lands and the uninhabited places, and the inhabited heights of the world under heaven. **read ›**

23 **Proverbs 8:27** When he prepared the heaven, I was present with him; and when he marked out his own throne upon the winds, **read ›**

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24 **Proverbs 15:19** The ways of the idle are strewn with thorns, but those of the courageous are well trodden. **read ›**

25 **Ecclesiastes 11:9** Be glad, young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth, and walk in the ways of your heart blameless, and not in the sight of your eyes; and know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. **read ›**

26 **Isaiah 2:4** And he shall judge among the nations, and rebuke a numerous people; and they shall beat their swords into plows, and their spears into sickles; and nation shall not take up sword against nation, and they shall never again learn war. **read ›**

27 **Isaiah 16:13** This is the word which the Lord spoke concerning Moab, when he spoke. **read ›**

28 **Isaiah 16:14** And now I say: in three years, years of a hired worker, the glory of Moab will be dishonored with all his great wealth, and he will be left few in number, and without honor. **read ›**

29 **Isaiah 18:6** and he will leave them together for the birds of heaven and for the wild beasts of the earth; and the birds of heaven will gather upon them, and all the wild beasts of the earth will come upon it. **read ›**

30 **Micah 4:3** And he will judge between many peoples and rebuke strong nations far away; and they will beat their swords into plows and their spears into sickles; and nation shall never again lift up sword against nation, nor shall they ever learn war again. **read ›**

31 **1 Maccabees 3:19** For victory in battle does not depend on the size of the army, but strength comes from heaven. **read ›**

32 **1 Maccabees 5:19** And he commanded them, saying, “Take charge of this people, and do not join battle with the nations until we return.” **read ›**

33 **1 Maccabees 5:67** On that day some priests fell in battle, wishing to do brave deeds, when they went out to battle without counsel. **read ›**

34 **1 Maccabees 8:26** And to those who make war they shall not give or supply grain, weapons, money, or ships, as it has seemed good to the Romans; and they shall keep their obligations without receiving anything. **read ›**

35 **1 Maccabees 8:27** In the same way, if war comes first upon the nation of the Jews, the Romans shall fight as allies wholeheartedly, as the occasion shall be prescribed for them. **read ›**

36 **1 Maccabees 15:19** So it has pleased us to write to the kings and the countries that they should not seek the harm of the Jews, nor make war on them or their cities or their country, nor make an alliance with those who make war on them. **read ›**

37 **2 Maccabees 5:25** When he arrived at Jerusalem, he pretended to be peaceful and waited until the holy day of the Sabbath; then, finding the Jews resting from work, he ordered his troops to parade under arms. **read ›**

38 **2 Maccabees 8:36** So he who had undertaken to secure tribute for the Romans from the captives of Jerusalem proclaimed that the Jews had God as their champion, and that for this reason the Jews could not be harmed, because they followed the laws God had ordained. **read ›**

39 **2 Maccabees 11:9** Then they all together blessed the merciful God and were strengthened in their souls, ready to wound not only men but the wildest beasts and walls of iron. **read ›**

40 **2 Maccabees 13:14** So, committing the outcome to the Creator of the world, and urging those with him to fight nobly to the death for the laws, the temple, the city, the country, and the commonwealth, he pitched his camp near Modein. **read ›**

41 **3 Maccabees 1:23** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

42 **3 Maccabees 3:15** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

43 **4 Maccabees 9:23** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

44 **4 Maccabees 9:29** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

45 **4 Maccabees 16:13** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

46 **4 Maccabees 16:14** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

47 **4 Maccabees 17:23** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

48 **4 Maccabees 18:6** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

49 **Matthew 5:9** Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. **read ›**

50 **Matthew 5:39** But I tell you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. **read ›**

51 **Matthew 26:52** Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place, for all those who take the sword will die by the sword. **read ›**

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52 **Luke 3:14** Soldiers also asked him, saying, “What about us? What must we do?” He said to them, “Extort from no one by violence, neither accuse anyone wrongfully. Be content with your wages.” **read ›**

53 **Acts 14:21** After preaching the gospel in that city and making many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, **read ›**

54 **Romans 14:18** For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. **read ›**

55 **2 Corinthians 10:3** For though we walk in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh; **read ›**

56 **2 Corinthians 10:4** for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God for the throwing down of strongholds, **read ›**

57 **2 Timothy 2:3** You therefore, endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. **read ›**

58 **2 Timothy 2:4** No soldier on duty entangles himself in the affairs of life, that he may please him who enrolled him as a soldier. **read ›**

59 **Hebrews 11:34** quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, grew mighty in war, and caused foreign armies to flee. **read ›**

60 **Revelation 13:7** It was given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. Authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation was given to him. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *25 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Isaiah 2:3

Micah 4:1

Matthew 5:40 · 5:42 · 5:45 · 5:46 · 8:5 · 27:5

Mark 12:32 · 16:15

Luke 3:12 · 6:29 · 6:32 · 7:1

John 3:19 · 12:6 · 17:11 · 18:36

Acts 1:18

1 Corinthians 5:11

2 Corinthians 5:1

Galatians 6:2

1 Thessalonians 5:17

1 Timothy 4:13

1 Peter 2:11

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Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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THE END OF THIS STUDY