

Memorial Day 2009: Alvin C. York: Reluctant Hero. Introduction, Luke 11:21-22; 22:36b, the Conscientious Objector; the Meuse-Argonne Offensive: the Fight for Hill 223

Alvin C. York: Reluctant Hero

Memorial Day Service

Sunday, May 24, 2009

I. Introduction:

The right to keep and bear arms was recognized by the writers of our Constitution as unalienable which means “incapable of being surrendered, made different, altered, or withdrawn.” This right is codified in the Second Amendment among the Bill of Rights and is also promoted by our Lord in two significant passages of Scripture, one as an illustration and the other as a commandment. The first is found in:

Luke 11:21 - “Whenever a prepared man has been completely armed with weapons, guards and defends his own home and property, his possessions are undisturbed.

v. 22 - “But when someone stronger than he attacks him and is victorious over him, he disarms him of the weapons on which he depended and distributes his plunder.”

The mandate is found later in the Gospel at:

Luke 22:36b - “... and let the one who does not own a sword, sell [imperative of command form the verb πωλέω, *pōleō*: to sell] his coat and buy [imperative of command of the verb ἀγοράζω, *agopazō*: to buy] one.”

II. The Conscientious Objector:

One of our nation’s most likable heroes was a man who at first was its most unlikely hero. Although an expert marksman with a rifle, following his salvation he became indoctrinated in the false doctrine of pacifism through an erroneous understanding of the King James Version’s translation of the Sixth Commandment in Exodus 20:13, “Thou shalt not kill.”

The word “kill” is the masculine Hebrew noun רָצַח *rasah* and it refers to premeditated murder, which was not apparent to York’s reading of the King James or his pastor’s teachings on the subject.

Because York sincerely desired to follow the teachings of God’s Word, he initially sought to avoid service after being drafted by the Army during World War I. He is a legitimate example of a person whose religious convictions motivate him to avoid military service from the honest conclusion that to do so would be against God’s will.

As a tribute to the soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen who have defended our nation’s freedoms for almost 233 years, today’s Memorial Day service will highlight the story of a young man who was born in the small farming community of Pall Mall, Tennessee, in 1887.

Alvin Cullum York was the firstborn son of William and Mary York's family of 11 children. After his father died when he was young, Alvin took over the chores of running the 70-acre family farm and supporting his mother and younger siblings. He had no formal education and achieved the reputation of crack shot and hell raiser. However, in his mid twenties, his faith in Christ resulted in a dramatic turnaround in his lifestyle. He became a teetotaler, an elder in his church, and a leader of its choir. He subscribed unwaveringly to whatever the Bible taught and thought it not unusual to place the Word of God above all earthly powers. Therefore, when he was drafted for service into World War I, he did not think it improper to apply for conscientious-objector status.

York appealed to the draft board in Jamestown, Tennessee, for an exemption and received this reply:

"Denied, because we do not think 'The Church of Christ in Christian Union' is a well-recognized religious sect. Also, we understand it has no creed except the Bible, which its members more or less interpret for themselves, and some do not disbelieve in war—at least there is nothing forbidding them to participate."

It's interesting that the reasons for rejection were based on the observation that the Pall Mall Church of Christ in Christian Union had "no special creeds except the Bible." The doctrinal statement of this denomination expresses clear belief in biblical inerrancy, salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, a pretribulational rapture, a premillennial Second Advent and dispensational theology. But interpreting Scripture from the King James Version led the denomination to adopt an extremely legalistic moral and social code. Nevertheless, believing these things to be true they were loyal to them and in so doing were confident they were doing God's will.

Since the Church of Christ in Christian Union was considered outside the government's idea of "well-organized religious sects," York reported for duty at Fort Gordon, Georgia. There he struggled with the dilemma which pitted flawed theology with a desire to serve his country. On this subject, we go to the York biography by John Perry:

York [Gary Cooper] was assigned to the 21st Training Battalion, enduring the routine of army life without complaint and determined to learn. After two months, York was transferred in February 1918 to Company G, 328th Battalion, 82nd Division. The uniforms of the 82nd were distinguished by a shoulder patch emblazoned with two capital A's, noting its distinction as the All-American Division ... from the claim that there were soldiers in the unit from every state.

Major George Edward Buxton [Stanley Ridges], commander of the 328th Battalion, was an attentive and sensitive leader, well-equipped for the challenge of turning his international potpourri of recruits into a capable, effective fighting force. (p. 23)

The captain in charge of Company G was a Georgian named E. C. B. Danforth [Harvey Stephens]. To him and Major Buxton, Private York was a natural leader, and they made tentative plans to promote him to corporal. However, in his personnel file in Washington was a pink slip of paper reading: "Conscientious Objector, York, Alvin C. Desires release as he is a conscientious objector." Could a conscientious objector be trusted in a position of leadership?

York had never mentioned his religious beliefs or his objection to war to anyone after leaving Jamestown. Following his denial of an exemption appeal by the district board, he had not pursued the issue further. However, without his knowledge, Private York's mother and Pastor (Rosier) Pile [Walter Brennan] had continued to petition for his release from military duty and had met with some success. The War Department sent a form to York at Camp Gordon that had been filed by Pile on his behalf, affirming York's religious aversion to war. The private was instructed to sign the papers and send them back. If he signed, he would be certified as a conscientious objector and excused from military service. Pastor Pile also helped Mary York [Margaret Wycherly] file a plea that Alvin was her sole support as a widow. That form was delivered to Camp Gordon as well.

To the astonishment of all who knew of the situation, Alvin refused to sign either form. In reasoning through his position, he had become convinced that there were two reasons why he should not fight. First, the Bible was against it. Second, he knew from his personal experience—in saloons and from the deaths of both of his grandfathers as noncombatant casualties in the Civil War—that fighting was wrong. These two points were his justification for an honest exemption; he would be excused on those terms or not at all. (p. 25)

There were several men in camp claiming conscientious objector status but Private York's sincerity and conviction made him different from the others in the captain's eyes. This man was not a coward nor a slacker, but a soldier truly burdened with doing right as he saw it. Danforth discussed the matter with his superior officer, Major Buxton, who suggested the two of them talk with York together.

A few nights later, York was summoned by Captain Danforth to join him in Major Buxton's quarters. Before leaving his barracks, York knelt on the wooden floor to pray for wisdom and guidance. Then he arose, picked up his Bible, and walked outside. (p. 26)

Major Buxton greeted his visitors with a smile and invited them to sit. "I don't want to discuss this question as a battalion commander discussing it with an officer and a private," he began. "I want to discuss it as three American citizens interested in a common cause. I respect any honest religious conviction and am here to talk through them man to man."

Turning to York, he asked the private why he was opposed to going to war. "Because I belong to a church that disbelieves in fighting and killing, Major."

"What sort of church creed do you have that tells you this?"

"The only creed is the Bible, which I have done accepted as the inspired word of God and final authority for all men."

"What do you find in the Bible that's against war?"

"The Bible says 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

"Do you accept everything in the Bible—every sentence, every word—as completely as you accept the sixth commandment?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

Buxton turned to Luke 22 in his own Bible and read aloud. "He that hath no sword, let him sell his cloak and buy one.' Is that in the Bible?"

York admitted that it was and rejoined with another verse of his own. "If a man smite you on one cheek, turn the other to him."

Buxton nodded in agreement. “Yes, the Bible says that. But let me ask you this. Do you believe that the Christ who drove the money changers from the temple with a whip would stand up and do nothing when the helpless Belgian people were overrun and driven from their homes?”

As a student of the Scriptures, second elder Alvin York had met his match. He and Buxton, with Captain Danforth joining in from time to time, talked and read aloud from the Bible for more than an hour. Without argument, the men read back and forth to each other. York believed the Lord was with him in that little room, four hundred miles and a world away from the log cabin where he had read and prayed so many hours in search of the answers they were still seeking now. (p. 27)

York: “When St. Peter struck off the ear of the high priest’s servant, Christ put it back on and told Peter to put up his sword. ‘They that live by the sword shall die by the sword.’”

Buxton: “‘For my kingdom is not of this world; but if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight.’”

York: “‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’”

Buxton: “‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.’ We must fight for our earthly government whenever its liberties are threatened. Christians have a duty to their leaders.”

York: “‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.’”

Buxton ended the evening with a reading from the thirty-third chapter of Ezekiel [vv. 4 and 6], as the prophet described the duties of the watchman to blow a warning trumpet in case of enemy attack. “‘Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. ... But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand.’”

Was York to sound the watchman’s trumpet for the innocent Belgians and French being slaughtered in their homes? At the moment he felt more confused than ever. Before rising to leave, York said a short silent prayer. As he looked up, his eyes met the major’s, and York realized the man’s smile reminded him greatly of his father’s.

“I’d like some time to think it over, Major,” said York. “In the meantime I’ll go on just as I have been, doing everything I’m told to do and trying to be a good soldier.”

“Take all the time you like,” replied Major Buxton, shaking hands, “and come to me any time you need to.” The major also lent York a copy of *The History of the United States*, suggesting he read about the lives of great Christian patriots who had gone before: Washington, Adams, Madison, and others. (p. 28)

York thought constantly about his meeting with Major Buxton, but with all the commotion of life at camp, he couldn’t find the solitude and quiet to follow the matter through. What he needed was the still, familiar woods climbing the hills inside the Valley of the Three Forks of the Wolf.

He applied for leave and received a ten-day pass. Immediately he packed his small suitcase and headed to the Camp Gordon depot, retracing his journey through Atlanta by rail.

York had memorized several of the passages Major Buxton read aloud in his quarters that night and eagerly sat down with pastor Pile to sort things out. They talked for days on end and held church services like they'd done before Alvin left home.

After a few days in the valley, he was approaching a state of despair. Time was running out, he didn't have an answer, and he saw no hint of how to find one. Talking wasn't helping; Major Buxton's book about American heroes wasn't helping either. Then he recalled a place he knew in the mountains above the river where he might be able to think matters through. From there he could see the valley in a single sweep and hear nothing but the water and the wind. Because it was a long climb, hardly anyone ever went up there. (p. 29)

He left his mother's cabin for the hillside, climbing higher and higher up the northeastern face of the valley wall until he reached a rock ledge below two huge, flat-sided limestone boulders sitting upright, side by side near the top of the ridge. Some people called them the Yellow Doors; to others they were Bible Rock. It took hours to climb through the grapevines and blackberry briars. But once he reached his perch, York could look across the whole valley and follow the course of the river as it collected its three branches beneath him and meandered off to the west. There Alvin knelt on a patch of grass and began to pray.

He prayed the rest of the day. As the sun set across the valley, he built a fire and prayed on into the night.

Bedtime was usually soon after dark, but as the night deepened, York never grew sleepy. He asked his Lord to have pity on him and show him the light. He begged for God's comfort, and for God to tell him what he should do.

Expanding later on the single brief diary entry written during his furlough, Alvin described what happened next: (p. 30)

As I prayed there alone, a great peace kind of come into my soul and a great calm come over me, and I received my assurance. He heard my prayer and He come to me on the mountainside. I didn't see Him, of course, be he was there just the same. I knowed he was there. He understood that I didn't want to be a fighter or a killing man, that I didn't want to go to war to hurt nobody nohow. And yet I wanted to do what my country wanted me to do. I wanted to serve God and my country, too. He understood all of this. He seen right inside of me, and He knowed I had been troubled and worried, not because I was afraid, but because I put Him first, even before my country, and I only wanted to do what would please Him. (pp. 30-31)

So He took pity on me and He gave me the assurance I needed. I didn't understand everything. I didn't understand how He could let me go to war and even kill and yet not hold it against me. I didn't even want to understand. It was His will and that was enough for me. So at last I begun to see the light. I begun to understand that no matter what a man is forced to do, so long as he is right in his own soul he remains a righteous man. I knowed I would go to war. I knowed I would be protected from all harm, and that so long as I believed in Him He would not allow even a hair of my head to be harmed.

As the sun climbed over the ridge behind him, sunlight spilled down into the valley, glistening on the river. With a prayer of thanks, Private Alvin York rose to his feet and began his climb down.

He said goodbye to his mother and Pastor Pile, assuring them he would return unharmed. Taking up his suitcase once more, Private York left for Camp Gordon on March 29 in order to be on duty by the time his leave expired two days later. (p. 31)

On April 19 Company G left Camp Gordon for Camp Upton, New York, where they stayed ... until the last day of the month. That day they traveled to Boston, where Captain Danforth formed his company up and asked each man individually if he objected to sailing for Europe and fighting the Germans. To his astonishment, Private York, after all the talking and thinking the captain knew he'd done, hesitated to answer when his time came.

"I don't object to fighting, sir," said York, "but the only thing that bothers me is, are we in the right or in the wrong?" A short conversation followed.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," concluded the captain.

"If a man can make peace by fighting, he is a peacemaker," York responded.

Again the captain asked Private York if he objected to fighting.

"No, sir, I do not," York replied in a clear, confident voice.¹ (p. 32)

On May 1, 1918, Alvin York and the men of Company G, 2nd Battalion, 328th Infantry, boarded a Scandinavian transport in Boston for the voyage to Europe. By October, York was to demonstrate the strength of character and moral courage which only find their source in an unswerving faith in God. In doing so, he relied on the divine protection afforded those who seek to do their duty within God's will. The events of October 8, 1918, blazoned Alvin Cullum York's name into our nation's military heritage forever.

III. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive: The Fight for Hill 223:

The mission set for October 8, 1917, was to destroy a railroad which was a logistical supply line for the Germans. As a part of the Meuse-Argonne \myüz ar-gon\' Offensive, this engagement took place near the small French village of Châtel Chéhéry:

¹ John Perry, "The Sixth Commandment" chap. 7 in *Sgt. York: His life, Legend & Legacy: The Remarkable Untold Story of Sergeant Alvin C. York* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 23-32.

An excellent network of railroads had been one of the key elements in Germany's success throughout the war, allowing the rapid transport of men and supplies both up and down the front and to the from the great manufacturing centers of the German heartland. The system was also crucial for quick redeployment of troops along the front or for a rapid and orderly retreat. Disrupting the rail network would throw Germany into a panic from which it could not recover.

The main line ran parallel to the front for more than three hundred miles, from Belgium southeast to Strasbourg \sträs'-burg\, France, on the Rhine River. At each of three principle junctions along the way, a heavily traveled line of supply and escape ran northeast into Germany. The northern- and western-most of these junctions was at Maubeuge \mō-barzh'\, France, from where a line went through Liège \lyezh\, Belgium, to Cologne \ka-lōn'\, Germany. On down the main track, near Mézières \mā-zher'\ and Sedan \sa-dän'\, France, a second northeast-bound line connected the front to Luxembourg, Luxembourg \luk'-sam-burk\ and Coblenz \kō'-blents\, Germany. The third, a southern line, took a picturesque route from Strasbourg, following the Rhine Valley all the way through Mannheim \män'-hīm\ to Mainz \mīntz\, Germany.

The Allied offensive call for a gargantuan pincer action against this network with the British First and Third Armies leading the attack eastward at Maubeuge, cutting off German escape to Cologne, and the American First and French Fourth Armies advancing northward to Mézières and Sedan, stopping the enemy retreat toward Luxembourg and Coblenz. (p. 2)

The Americans were about halfway through the Argonne Forest when the offensive stalled on October 1. After a rest and resupplying the front with fresh troops, the advance resumed on October 4, the same day the 2nd Battalion, 328th Infantry, 82nd American Division received orders to prepare for action.

Among the soldiers of Company G, 2nd Battalion, was a strapping six-footer with a red moustache and an unruly shock of red hair whose friends back home called him "Big 'Un." He was a corporal, Corporal Alvin C. York, and was a squad leader. His exemplary deportment, natural leadership ability, and outstanding marksmanship had overshadowed any lingering doubt his superiors may have had about his resolve on the battlefield.² (pp. 2-3)

Four days later in an assault designed to take Hill 223, this backwoods, uneducated but devout Christian man established a legacy equal to legendary crack shot and fellow Tennessean, Davy Crockett. John Perry gives us the details of events which transpired over a period of three hours fifteen minutes during the early morning of October 8, 1918, events that would result in Alvin York being awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the French *Croix de Guerre*, and the Congressional Medal of Honor.

² Perry, "Three Hours Fifteen Minutes," chap. 1 in *Sgt. York*, 2-3.