
The Church and Military Service

BY CHARLES D. MARTIN

What is the Christian's relationship to war and violence? How should a church member demonstrate loyalty to government? What position should our youth take when faced by the military draft? The church has wrestled with these issues for years. From its beginning the Seventh-day Adventist Church has gone on record as opposing war and bloodshed. It views fighting among nations as the work of Satan.

As Adventists, we place a high value on human life. Throughout its history, the church has emphasized the saving of life rather than taking it. Because of this, the church has traditionally held the position of noncombatancy in military service.

SDA History

As far back as the 1860s, just after

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The Bible teaches that God's followers on earth have dual citizenship. How then should the Christian react when called upon by civil government to serve in a war?

the Civil War began, the young and growing church faced this issue of involvement in war. It was not an easy experience. The matter was debated

actively throughout the church but especially in the pages of the *Review and Herald*. The editor, James White, was one of the most vocal on the subject. In time, the early Adventists realized that it was possible to pay a \$300 commutation fee and thereby gain exclusion from the draft. Most Adventists felt this was the way out. By selecting this alternative, they would not have to face the issue of serving in the military. To show their loyalty, however, Adventists helped to raise money for bonuses to get other men to enlist in the army.

On March 3, 1863, the national draft was initiated. Shortly thereafter, Congress was confronted with discussions

of personal rights concerning combat service. About a year later, February 8, 1864, provisions were made to allow noncombatant service for those drafted as conscientious objectors. Adventists took no steps since the law still provided for anyone to pay the \$300 commutation fee. The money thus collected went to care for sick and wounded soldiers rather than being paid as a bonus for enlisting.

In July of 1864 the privilege of buying exemption was restricted to those recognized as conscientious objectors to war. Now the church became active in developing a theology based on biblical principles. Well-known Adventist leaders in the United States such as J.

N. Andrews were sent to Washington, D.C., to meet with government officials; a number of state officials were also contacted. As a result of these discussions, Seventh-day Adventists were recognized by the U.S. Government as noncombatants.

The Church's Position Since Then

Through the years that followed, the church continued to advocate this position concerning military service. In 1954, a General Conference Session action clearly restated this position. By 1970, with the confusing issues of Vietnam on everybody's minds, the question was raised whether the church's stand ought to be looked at again. A

25-member committee, representing a broad spectrum of thinking—pacifism, combatancy, noncombatancy, and selective conscientious objection—studied the subject thoroughly for more than a year and a half. Their conclusions resulted in a carefully worded Annual Council action in October 1972. It reads as follows:

THE RELATIONSHIPS OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT AND WAR

That we accept as our basic view the 1954 General Conference Session action entitled, "The Relationships of Seventh-day Adventists to Civil Government and War," as amended at the 1954 Autumn Council, and further amended as follows:

Genuine Christianity manifests itself in good citizenship and loyalty to civil government. The

breaking out of war among men, however, in no way alters the Christian's supreme allegiance and responsibility to God or modifies his obligation to practice his beliefs and put God first.

This partnership with God through Jesus Christ who came into this world not to destroy men's lives, but to save them, causes Seventh-day Adventists to advocate a noncombatant position, following their divine Master in not taking life, but rendering all possible service to save it. As they accept the obligation of citizenship as well as its benefits, their loyalty to government requires them willingly to serve the state in any noncombatant capacity, civil or military, in war or peace, in uniform or out of it, which will contribute to saving life, asking only that they may serve in those capacities which do not violate their conscientious convictions.

This statement is not a rigid position binding church members but gives guidance leaving the individual member free to assess the situation for himself.

The wording then went on to point out (in the North American Division action) that even though the church continues to hold that 1-A-O noncombatancy in military service is still the recommended position, a member may choose either the 1-O (pacifist) civilian position or the 1-A (combat) position without forfeiting the church's support. The church will assist each person as needs require. The choice made is not a test of church fellowship.

While many countries do not allow a choice between combatant and non-combatant service, as does the United States, the principles outlined above still apply. In many countries the choices are very limited—either com-

bat service in the military, or civilian service as a conscientious objector. Often the latter involves a longer term of service and in some cases more difficult conditions. In such countries the church needs to assist the youth and their families as they endeavor to convince the selection boards of the sincerity of their convictions.

Biblical Principles for Noncombatancy

On what principles is the church's stand based? The Bible teaches that God's followers on earth have dual citizenship. The Old Testament, under the theocracy, provided a natural harmony between these two citizenships since the Lord directed both the spiritual and civil lives of His people.

Throughout its history, the Seventh- day Adventist Church has placed a high value on human life.

In the New Testament, however, a dichotomy developed. The early believers were required to balance their loyalties between their earthly and heavenly citizenships.

Paul, Peter, and other New Testament writers repeatedly show the Chris-

tian's duty to "be subject to principalities and powers, . . . obey magistrates"; "Honor the king"; see that "prayers . . . be made . . . For kings, and for all that are in authority" (Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17; 1 Timothy 2:1-3; see also Romans 13:1-7). The Christian's loyalty to civil government is clearly described. His or her loyalty to God is just as specifically delineated. Hebrews 11:13-16 says that Christ's followers are strangers and pilgrims on earth. "They desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: . . . [God] hath prepared for them a city."

Christ clarified this dual citizenship and responsibility when He wisely answered the Pharisees and Herodians with the words, "Render therefore

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unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). In His own way, Christ clearly outlined our duty to God and to country.

That the early apostles understood this principle as well seems clear. On one occasion Peter and the other apostles were put in prison and told not to preach the gospel. An angel commanded them to go and preach. Here opposite commands were given, one by men, the other by angels, thus raising again the issue of dual loyalty. The answer came out forcefully. "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The principle for today is obvious: Obey civil laws as far as possible, but when they conflict with God's law, His must take precedence.

Life is a gift from God and as such is so valuable that its termination cannot be taken lightly. Because of this concept, yet with the feeling of obligation as loyal citizens, Seventh-day Adventists have felt that their position concerning military service is best reflected by the 1-A-O classification of noncombatancy. They will enter military service but not train with or use weapons. They will go as far as possible to serve their country, yet will draw the line when called upon to disobey God, such as routine work on Sabbath.

Drawing the Line

The question may be asked, "How far should an Adventist civilian go in assisting the general effort during wartime, such as working in an airplane plant or at a company that produces guidance systems for missiles?" Some issues dealing with war are too multifaceted to expect corporate answers. Every person must make a personal decision, based on a study of the issues and his or her own conscience.

The span of involvement is broad. For instance, what about the farmer who grows the wheat that might be used for flour to make bread to feed combat troops? What about paying taxes, since a sizeable portion goes for armaments? Should we withhold that portion (how do we know the exact amount)? Should we refuse to pay taxes entirely because of this?

What about the medic who cares for a combat soldier; is he responsible for the soldier's subsequent actions in battle?

These are some of the questions facing concerned people; such dilemmas require personal answers based upon a close relationship with the Lord and a careful consideration of the principles involved. As far as the medic is concerned, we should remember that God's whole plan is based upon individual decision and personal responsibility. Ezekiel 14:14, 20 emphasizes the personal responsibility and the essential choices required of Noah, Daniel, and Job. The medic ministering to the wounded is serving in a time of real need. What happens after the healing is up to the wounded person; he determines his own future actions. Christ's miracles were not predicated upon a promise of reformation and obedience, though, of course, the message of "Go and sin no more" was continually stressed. Who knows, a dedicated medic on the battlefield may accomplish a similar mission of healing and witness.

Should Adventists Enlist?

Presently, there is no military draft in the United States; entering the military is strictly voluntary. Largely because of Sabbath issues, which continue to be a serious problem, our young people are urged not to enlist, in spite of promises made by recruiters. Conditions of high unemployment and attractive career opportunities make the military appealing, but, based upon the Sabbath issues and counsel from experienced military officers, SDA enlistments are discouraged.

All Seventh-day Adventist young men, however, are urged to register within 30 days of their 18th birthday; this is the law! Registration is simple and can be done in 15 minutes at a nearby post office. No questions are asked about the registrant's convictions or classification request; only name, address, phone number, et cetera. Classification will be done later.

Should Christians Leave the Military?

What about military service? Should members who are now in stay in? Many individuals have been converted in the service, a number of whom have con-

tinued to serve until retirement. In most of these cases, they have achieved sufficient seniority so that they can determine their own schedules, thereby solving the Sabbath issue, or they are able to favorably influence those in authority who do so. Should the church counsel such converts to leave the military?

How was this handled in Bible times? When soldiers came to John the Baptist asking "What shall we do?" (Luke 3:14) no record indicates that they were told to leave the military, but among other things, they were to be content with their wages. The centurion who came to Jesus was concerned about his servant (Matt. 8:5-13). It was this that impressed Christ. Rather than a statement on the man's life-style and occupation, He commended the centurion for his faith and depth of experience.

The centurion of a Roman legion, Cornelius, was one of the first Gentiles to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:1-6; 44, 45; 11:15). Again, no mention is made of his leaving the Roman army. Christ's witness sometimes extended into unexpected areas of life, and biblical records seem to lack any instruction for all Christians to separate themselves from military service.

Who knows what plans the Lord may have for members to witness in the military? In deciding whether or not to remain, a person needs to balance the Lord's possible plan with the known worldliness found in typical military settings. However, we must remember that Christ chose to come to a sinful world to accomplish His mission of mercy.

Just and Unjust Wars

Through the years some individuals have believed the answer to the question of war and violence rests in the distinction between "just" and "unjust" wars. In a war considered "just," they choose to become active combatants, whereas in "unjust wars," they totally reject any involvement. This approach had an early beginning, for as Roland H. Bainton indicates in his book, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*, "A Christian ethic of war appears first to have been formulated by St. Ambrose and then more fully by St. Augustine." (See pages 89-92.) With this approach a set of firm criteria

developed for determining whether a war was to be considered "just." Bainton goes on to say that St. Augustine's "Code of War . . . was the code of Plato and Cicero, with Christian additions."—Page 95.

This position, classified as selective conscientious objection, is not accepted by the U.S. Selective Service System, and persons holding this position have been informed that their request for such classification will be denied. The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not advocate this position.

War and Politics

While conflict, whether conventional or nuclear, has been the setting for our thoughts thus far, another aspect must be considered in the complex milieu of the 1980s. Many young people have wondered about getting involved in antimilitary, antigovernment demonstrations of various types. What should be the Christian's attitude toward such activities? Should we stand for what we believe to be truth and principle, as did the apostles, even against government orders?

Granted, there may be some instances in which the issues are forthright and clear; here, certainly a Christian's voice needs to be heard. But, on the other hand, more often the enthusiasm of youth is captivated by the appeal of the moment, the desire for immediate action, the excitement of the crowd, while the manipulation of clever political agents goes unobserved. Because of the potential implications of such antigovernment demonstrations, the church counsels its youth not to participate in such activities.

Seventh-day Adventists, as loyal citizens, should carefully evaluate their public actions, considering the influence being exerted. They should ask themselves repeatedly, "How will this affect the Lord's work?" Of course, any such decisions take balanced judgment, for there are certainly times when we must defend principle and take a firm stand for truth.

Medical Cadet Corps

As we have seen, the Christian's relationship to government, war, and violence requires much thought and prayer in order to find that fine line of obedience to both God and country. In the early 1930s the church felt com-

elled to help its youth face these issues and prepare them for the impending military draft. Consequently, the Medical Cadet Corps was started in 1934. This military-type training, sponsored by the church, helped equip SDA youth to serve effectively.

The draft terminated in the United States in the early 1970s and the MCC terminated in the United States in 1971. By that time more than 50,000 Adventist youth had trained through the MCC and thousands had effectively served their country. This training is still being carried on in other countries, enabling church members to conscientiously meet their military obligations.

The Conscience Project

In the late 1970s the church felt the need for a new approach to educate its young people in these church/military/government relationships. In 1981, after two years of research and development, the National Service Organization introduced *The Conscience Project*. This project, a 10-hour, weekend-type workshop/seminar with a fast-moving format, appeals to 18- and 19-year-olds. It includes slide/cassette presentations, a special two-part motion picture, small group activities, role-playing, et cetera. The thrust of the program is decision-making. It deals first with general principles of making choices (applicable to many issues facing youth today) and then zeroes in on military service, church teachings on noncombatancy, other options available, and a brief view of basic training.

Many *Conscience Project* workshops have already been held with excellent results. Repeatedly young people, after taking the training, have responded by saying, "This is great. I'm glad my church is interested enough to explain this issue, describe my options, present the reasons for the church's position, and then let me make my own decision without pressure from anyone."

Included in the program is a computer game, with a two-track teaching program. The first track is a scenario of a draft-age youth receiving his mailgram notice of induction and the story that unfolds as decisions are made. The second track is a Selective Service System data bank that answers questions youth may have. As an added feature of

The Conscience Project, the first three pamphlets of a new two-color leaflet series have been printed. These leaflets, "What Can I Expect If I Join?" "What an Adventist Should Know About the Military," and "What If Uncle Sam Orders Me to Work on the Sabbath?" are additions to the basic NSO leaflets concerning the church and military service.

When the draft is launched again in the United States, the Medical Cadet Corps will probably also be reactivated. This program, along with *The Conscience Project*, will be used to more effectively prepare our young people.

What of the Future?

As described by the Bible, the international scene of the future is not very bright. Adventist church leaders, particularly educators and youth directors, need to give special consideration to this challenge. How can we best equip our youth to think through these vital issues? How can they better understand the way God moves among nations today? How can they develop a balanced view of the Christian's relationship to government and military service? If we can provide meaningful assistance to our youth, we will have given them a valuable legacy. □

For Further Information . . .

The following leaflets are available from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists:

NSO-1
"Seventh-day Adventist Teachings on Governmental Relationships and Noncombatancy"

NSO-2
"What You Ought to Know About . . . Noncombatant, Conscientious Objection"

NSO-3
"Filling Out the Questionnaire for Conscientious Objection"

NSO-4
"Seventh-day Adventists and Civil Government"

NSO-5
"Why Seventh-day Adventists Observe the Bible Sabbath"

NSO-6
"Sabbath Rulings in the Selective Service System and the U.S. Armed Forces"

The Unlikeliest Hero by Booton Herndon (1967), Pacific Press, Mountain View, Calif.

Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace by Roland H. Bainton (1960), Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn.

War: Four Christian Views, Ed. by Robert G. Clouse (1981), Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill.

Light Bearers to the Remnant by Richard W. Schwarz (1979), Pacific Press, Mountain View, Calif.