THE CHRISTIAN AND WAR 1

The Case For Selective Nonpacifism

CHUCK SCRIVEN

How shall the Christian relate to war?

Selective nonpacifism, in my opinion, is the only consistent stance. By selective nonpacifism I mean that some wars will be deemed unjust and the Christian will conscientiously refuse to fight in them. I mean, furthermore, that some wars will be deemed just, and the Christian will conscientiously determine to fight in them.

This position implies a rejection of pure pacifism and of so-called "conscientious cooperation," as traditionally advocated by Adventists. It is taken in full awareness that present laws in the United States are unsympathetic toward selective nonpacifism. I hold that these laws ought to be changed — a matter to which I will give brief attention later.

If selective nonpacifism is the only consistent stance for the Christian, how can its implications be squared with *agape,* or Christian love? As will be seen, it is precisely because of Christian love that pacifism and "conscientious cooperation" must be rejected.

Christian love manifests itself in deep and impartial concern for the well-being of all people. Ideally, it does not retaliate and it does not mistreat even an enemy. In the context of a fallen world, however, we are not in an ideal situation. Sometimes, for example, an imperative to restrain from killing may conflict with an imperative to preserve life. When one is faced with such conflicting ethical alternatives, actions that are compatible with *ideal* Christian love will be impossible. We must then choose in faith the way that seems most nearly to correspond with ideal Christian love. The character of our world is such that, paradoxical as it may seem, refusal to kill, in some contexts, may be the breaking of the sixth commandment and a betrayal of Christian love.

Selective nonpacifism rests on the theory of the just war, hinted at in Plato and formulated in Christian terms by Ambrose and by Augustine in greater detail. The advancing technology of warfare has stimulated continuing dis-

cussion and adaptation of the just war theory. Contemporary ethicists who advocate just war would agree, in the main, that such a war must —

1. Have as its goal the restoration of peace and realization of justice.

2. Mount destructive power equal only to the task of destroying the power of the oppressor. This destructive power must, insofar as is possible, refrain from devastation of civil populations, and must never involve malicious atrocities or reprisals.

3. Be a limited war. Unlimited warfare is never just, because today in unlimited warfare the distinction between victory and defeat would be so blurred as to be unrecognizable; indeed, there would be victory for neither side and defeat for all.

4. Have no absolute ends, but be only an instrument of specific national policy.

5. Have reasonable chance of victory, so that futile destruction of life is not inevitable from the outset.

6. Be conducted in an attitude of Christian love.[1]

The purpose of the just war theory is to affirm that the Christian, in a world of conflicting ethical alternatives, must pursue the best of these alternatives. Where war is the best alternative, a man is ethically compelled to participate. The decision to do so will never be easy, of course, because there will be no war where the strategy and motives of any side will fit perfectly the specifications of the just war theory.

What may be said of pacifism? The Christian pacifist contends that his stance is a witness, that it is the only way to avoid compromise of Christian principle. He is fearful, as Roland Bainton puts it, "that, if in withstanding the beast he descend to the methods of the beast, he will himself become the beast, and though the field be won the cause will be lost."[2] Pacifists assume that participation in war is sin, in every case, and point out that sin is never permissible even in pursuit of justice. To seek the relative good, they say, may be to forfeit the absolute.

They deny that withdrawal from the course of the country is irresponsible or cowardly and point out that protection, even of one's own family, cannot be the ultimate concern. And any good that may be accomplished by military intervention needs to be set over against the damage inflicted.

I would agree that it is not necessarily cowardice to dissent from the course of one's nation. Protection, even of one's own family, is indeed not the ultimate. And war surely demands weighing probable accomplishment against probable infliction of damage.

I take issue, however, with the pacifist's insistence that nonpacifism is

always a turning away from the principle of Christian love. I would argue that the pacifist misunderstands Christian love because his view of it leaves it incapable of grappling with the common problems of a fallen world. By his abstention, he becomes irrelevant; by his unwillingness to destroy the oppressor, he forsakes the oppressed.

Isn't a correct understanding of Christian love the most compelling argument for selective *non*pacifism? After all, the Christian's concern for the well-being of all people requires, where there are conflicting ethical alternatives, that he choose the way that contributes the most to human happiness for all men. Where this concern calls for violent action against an unjust aggressor, the Christian, in response to the demands of love, must fight.

Adventists have traditionally opted for what is called "conscientious cooperation." My objection to it is that it rides the fence. Indiscriminate noncombatancy simply avoids some important ethical issues — such as whether a war is just or not. The conscientious cooperator fancies that he is doing all that is required of him simply by (*a*) heeding the call of his country, no matter what war it has gotten itself into, and (*b*) refusing to kill the enemy.

In a just war, the only consistent action is that action which seeks the quickest possible termination of enemy aggression. Presumably, killing is involved here. In unjust war, the Christian ought not to participate in the military at all.

At present, the laws of the United States rule out selective nonpacifism. In order to be excused from participation in a war, according to the Universal Military Training and Service Act, one must be "opposed to participation *in war in any form*."[3]

These draft laws ought to be reformed so that selective conscientious objection to particular wars can be a legal option. It seems only reasonable that a man ought to have the right to decide whether in good conscience he can participate in a war.

But would this not open the way for anarchy? Not if an adequate test of the seriousness of a candidate for exemption from a particular war were introduced. He should be required to defend his position, and he should participate in alternative civilian work during the years of his obligation to the country.

Such a law would have the advantage of creating a demand for improved political discourse in America. The government would benefit from the arguments of conscientious objectors and would be forced to counter with arguments of its own.[4]

How, then, shall the Christian relate to war? First, he should go through

the agony — for agony it will always be — of deciding whether war, as a response to some threatening evil, is justifiable or not. If it is, he should fight in that war in response to the demands of Christian love. If the war is unjust, he should refuse to fight.

Because United States law does not now provide for conscientious objection to particular wars, the most immediate concern of the church should be agitation for a law which would do so. Expertly written, such a law could avoid "the excessive individualism of anarchy" and destroy "governmental tyranny over conscience."[5]

THE CHRISTIAN AND WAR 2
A Defense of the Adventist Position

DONALD R. McADAMS

Seventh-day Adventists abhor all war. War causes great human suffering and interferes with our primary objective of preparing ourselves for the world to come and carrying the gospel to this generation. But war exists, and we cannot avoid it. Men have been fighting since the beginning of time; they will be fighting when the Lord returns.

How, then, should the Christian relate to war? Certainly he should avoid it if avoidance is possible. The early Christians took no part in war. As long as they were a minority of the Roman Empire, this position was tenable. But when the Roman Empire became Christian (one may assume the Romans were not true Christians, but many thousands must have been sincere believers), Romans had to fight to protect themselves from the barbarian hordes.