

The Case For Conscientious Objection

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50

A Christian attempting to discover Christ's teaching on war faces historical and theological confusion. On the one hand, the Scriptures enjoin him to love his enemies (Matthew 5:44), to establish peace with all men (Hebrews 12:14), not to avenge himself, for vengeance is the Lord's (Romans 12:19), and not to kill (Romans 13:9). On the other hand, he is confronted with the fact that for at least seventeen centuries most Christians have taken active part in their nations' wars, often fighting against each other.

Seventh-day Adventists have seemingly resolved this problem by taking a noncombatant position, on the ground that by so doing they are following the example of Christ in not taking human life, but rather rendering all possible service to save it. Does the Seventh-day Adventist Church, when it takes this position, really follow the example of Christ? Or is this position inconsistent with the spirit of the gospel, the writings of the apostles and disciples, and examples drawn from the history of the Christian Church?

From apostolic times to the decade A.D. 170-180, no evidence has been uncovered that Christians participated in military service.¹ The Christian community, in fact, was condemned for its unwillingness to support actively the wars of the Roman Empire. In A.D. 173 the Roman Celsus, a pagan, addressed the Christian community as follows: "If all men were to do the same as you, there would be nothing to prevent the king from being left in utter solitude and desertion, and the forces of the empire would fall into the hands of the wildest and most lawless barbarians."

In describing the Christian position, Athenagoras, a leading Christian contemporary of Celsus, stated that Christians "do not strike back, do not go to law when robbed; they give to them that ask of them and love their neighbors as themselves."

Justin Martyr, another outstanding Christian leader of this period, wrote: "We who are filled with war and mutual slaughter and every wickedness

have each of us in all the world changed our weapons of war. . . . [We have changed our] swords into plows and spears into farming tools,” and “we who formerly murdered one another now not only do not make war upon our enemies, but we gladly die confessing Christ.”

Church father Clement of Alexandria, who lived early in the third century, described the Christian community as “an army which sheds no blood.” “In peace, not in war, are we trained.” “If you enroll as one of God’s people, heaven is your country and God your lawgiver. And what are His laws? . . . Thou shalt not kill. . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. To him that striketh thee on the one cheek, turn to him the other.”

Lactantius, writing in A.D. 304-305, maintained: “God in prohibiting killing discountenances not only brigandage, which is contrary to human laws, but also that which man regards as legal. Participation in warfare therefore will not be legitimate to a just man whose military service is justice itself.”

51

It is to the latter part of the second century that archeologists trace tombstones that identify Roman Christians who were soldiers — probably men who remained in the service after having been converted to Christianity. The canons of Hippolytus, which date back to the early third century, obviously refer to this situation when they state that “a soldier of the civil authority must be taught not to kill men and to refuse so if he is commanded.” Martin of Tours clearly points out the conflict that Christians seem to have experienced during this period. Having been converted, he remained in the army for two years. When an actual battle was imminent, he turned in his resignation.

Not until 314 did the Church, at the Council of Arles, approve of Christians serving in the army. Still the question of actual killing by Christians remained unresolved. Not until the latter part of the fourth century did theologians begin to discuss the “just war” theory. St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, both church fathers, continued to emphasize the primacy of love, even stating that Christians as individuals had no right to self-defense. Borrowing from Stoicism and the Old Testament, they did find it permissible, nevertheless, to participate in communal defense even to the point of bloodshed. The only requirement was that the war must be just.

According to the just war theory, a war had to be declared by a just authority, for a just cause, had to use just means, and had to have reasonable expectations of success. A further requirement was that the lives of non-combatants had to be spared and that the means employed were to be no more oppressive than the evil remedied. Thus, it seems that Christians who

lived during the first three centuries of the Christian era followed a consistent policy of opposition to war and military service and that only in later years did they begin to formulate the just war theory. The theorizing which began as a rationalization aimed at justifying wars in defense of Christianity against paganism, ended in justifying wars of self-defense as well as wars of aggression.

52

Throughout the ages, nevertheless, there remained small groups of Christians who were unable to justify taking an active part in the wars of their countries. During the early Middle Ages, pacifism continued to be practiced by the Christian clergy and by various monastic orders, and in later years by small sectarian groups. Early in the thirteenth century a group of Waldensians made its return to the Church dependent upon a number of concessions, one of which was exemption from military service. Also, Wycliffe held that the highest Christian ideal required complete abstention from war, even though he admitted that war might be waged for the love of God or to correct people. Peter Chelciky, outstanding leader of the pacifist branch of the Hussite movement, maintained that Christ's law was the law of love, that the Christian's weapons were spiritual only, that his mission was to redeem souls, not to destroy bodies, and that Christians should therefore refuse military service.

During the Reformation and the period of post-Reformation, the sects continued the opposition of Christians to war. Among these, the Anabaptists (Mennonites and Hutterites) during the sixteenth century, the Quakers during the seventeenth, the Brethren in the eighteenth, and the Jehovah's Witnesses in the nineteenth century consistently opposed all wars and refused to become active participants in wars.

On the other hand, the larger Protestant bodies, generally following the Catholic tradition, found it morally justifiable to engage in warfare as long as they were able to rationalize the justness of specific wars. This view enabled the Kaiser's armies to march enthusiastically onto the battlefields, having been told that they were fighting for God, the Kaiser, and the Fatherland (*Für Gott, Kaiser, und Vaterland*). This view, further, enabled Hitler's Gestapo to select as its motto *Gott mit uns*, "God with us."

And while young Germans were fighting for God, the Kaiser, and the Fatherland, Reverend A. F. Winnington-Ingram, the Bishop of London, exhorted young Englishmen "to kill Germans — to kill them not for the sake of killing but to save the world, to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young as well as the old, to kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded as well as those fiends who crucified the Canadian Sergeant. . . .

As I have said a thousand times, I look upon it as a war of purity; I look upon every one who dies in it as a martyr.”²

More recently, many Christians were somewhat perplexed when they heard Cardinal Spellman of New York proclaim, during a visit to South Vietnam, that American troops there are “the defense, protection, and salvation not only of our country but, I believe, of civilization itself.”³

Where do such statements leave us? Where should we stand in this matter of war, defensive or offensive, declared or undeclared? Should we make a distinction between a moral and an immoral war, a just or an unjust war? Or should we support or oppose all wars on principle? Personally, I believe that there are four choices an individual can make when he is confronted with the problem of war.

53

1. He can either support or take an active part in war on the grounds that as a citizen of a country he is obligated to serve in its armed forces.

2. He can support and take an active part in war as long as the war seems to him to be a just war, but oppose it as soon as in good conscience he feels that the war has become immoral and unjust.

3. He can support and take an active part in war in noncombatant capacity, civil or military, in or out of uniform, and contribute thereby to saving lives.

4. He can oppose all wars on the grounds that war is unchristian, entirely opposed to and foreign to the doctrine of Christ. He thereby refuses to serve his country even in noncombatant capacity, because by doing so he would aid and abet his country, in a sense, in the destruction of human life.

Let us now briefly analyze each of these alternatives.

The first choice really need not detain us, since most Seventh-day Adventists would probably object to indiscriminate participation in war. I am certain that most of us would object to following orders blindly, since we believe that a man is responsible for the actions of his life, a sentiment which was given a certain legal standing perhaps most dramatically at the Nürnberg trials. Adolf Eichmann, credited as the author of the “final solution,” did not accept this position when he declared that in exterminating Jews he was only following the orders of his government.

The second choice could be defended on the grounds that the Old Testament is full of just wars, that killing of the unjust seems to have been favored by God and that even in the New Testament there are a number of texts (Revelation 13:10, for example) that seem to imply that under certain conditions killing is justified. The problem with this position is that, even though there may be some justification for believing that a Christian may

take an active part in a just war, modern wars cannot be considered morally justifiable, because they bring death to vast numbers of people indiscriminately, even if one allows for the high motivation and the “good intention” of a government. Also, because modern diplomacy is complicated, it is extremely difficult to ascertain at the outset of a war the responsibilities for its outbreak.⁴

The third choice is the one officially taken by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. On the surface this appears to be the best choice, since no one can really object to the saving of life, even when this saving takes place on the battlefield. From the Christian standpoint, a close examination will nevertheless show that this position is not really a valid one. The United States Field Manual states specifically that the primary duty of medical troops, as well as all other troops, is to contribute their utmost to the success of the command of which they are a part. Now I would find it difficult to visualize a German Christian in Hitler’s army contributing his utmost to the success of the command under which he was fighting. I would find it just as difficult to justify a Christian medical doctor’s acceptance of a full-time position at a brothel if he accepted that position with the understanding that his main function there would be to cure his patients of venereal disease so that they could get back to their “jobs” as soon as possible. What do our medics sent to the battlefield do but bring healing to our wounded in order to get them back into action — to enable them, that is, to kill, since killing is the soldier’s main purpose?⁵

The fourth position is probably the only one that affords a Christian conscience relative safety. Of course, it may be argued that one contributes indirectly to his country’s military effort even by engaging in civilian work. Maybe we could learn something from the example set by Thomas Lurting, a Quaker, who, having been impressed on a man-of-war, refused to engage in military and nonmilitary service on the ship itself, but agreed to load grain into warships, on the ground that he had been commanded to love his enemies. Though there may be a touch of legalism in the stand Lurting took, as Roland Bainton points out, nevertheless it has to be recognized that he was trying to obey his conscience and that he succeeded in doing this by drawing a line between direct contribution to war with humanitarianism and direct humanitarianism with an incidental assistance to war.⁶

Conscientious objection to military conscription in the United States today is governed by the Military Selective Service Act of 1967. This Act specifically states in Section 6 (j) that no person will “be subject to combatant training and service in the armed forces of the United States who, for

reason of religious training or belief, is conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form." The Act does not exempt from such training and service persons who, because of "essentially political, sociological or philosophical views, or a merely personal moral code," object to serving in the armed forces.

The problems that modern warfare has brought to the consciences of Christians are tremendous. Realizing this fact, many Christian churches in recent years have tried to come to grips with the problem of war and conscientious objection.⁷ Wishing to allow full freedom of conscience to their members, they have reevaluated their positions and have gone on record as recognizing the principle of the moral right of conscientious objection. They have also resolved to give assistance and full moral and spiritual support to their members who follow the voice of conscience either by participating or by refusing to participate in war or in training for war.

55

The Seventh-day Adventist Church acknowledged the right of its members to live by the dictates of their consciences when it decided that participation or refusal to participate in war should not affect church membership. I firmly believe, therefore, that the Church should face the consequences of this stand by extending its full support to all its members who, wishing to follow the dictates of their conscience, decide either to participate or to refuse to take an active part in their nation's wars.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 The historical documentation quoted in this article was drawn from ROLAND BAINTON's excellent study, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960).
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 207. The reference to the crucifixion of a Canadian sergeant was a fabricated atrocity story circulated by the Allies during World War One.
- 3 *New York Times*, December 26, 1966.
- 4 A good case for selective pacifism is made by CARL COHEN, Case for Selective Pacifism, *The Nation* 207, 11-15 (July 8, 1968).
- 5 EDGAR L. JONES, One War Is Enough, *Atlantic Monthly* 177, 48-53 (1946).
- 6 BAINTON, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
- 7 Among the larger religious bodies which have recently come out in support of conscientious objection are the Lutheran Church in America, the American Baptist Convention, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Church of the Nazarene, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Methodist Church, the United Presbyterian Church in U. S. A., and the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.