

# “You Shall Not Kill”

## THE CHRISTIAN AND WAR

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16

The uncertainty about whether bearing arms and participating in warfare constitute a violation of the sixth commandment has given rise to many problems in the Christian churches and to concern as to their relationship to the state. The position of Seventh-day Adventists has been that of noncombatancy. Since the Civil War, the Adventist church in the United States has consistently followed that course.

At the beginning of the First World War considerable problems arose when Adventist servicemen in countries other than the United States, particularly in Europe, met rigid opposition from their governments. It is well known that many Adventist church members, together with those of other denominations, suffered imprisonment and martyrdom because of their conviction. In Europe, dissent developed within the Adventist church, and the formation of splinter groups resulted.

Shortly after the war, a group of leaders from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists tried to bring about a reconciliation with these “reform movements.” In spite of numerous attempts through the years, however, the wounds have never healed completely. Because the governments of certain countries were unwilling to grant Adventists noncombatant status, church officials agreed that the men who were forced to participate in warfare should be permitted to retain church membership. This decision caused a considerable stir. Although the attitude of the church thus became more tolerant, remaining unsolved was the question of whether participating in warfare is tantamount to setting aside the sixth commandment, which says, “Thou shalt not kill.”<sup>1</sup> To many church members, noncombatancy was the

only position consistent with their interpretation of Scripture as being "Bible doctrine."

The purpose of this study is to reexamine the historical Adventist position on noncombatancy and to determine whether its conclusions are justifiable and biblically sound.

## I

Since much has been written on the history of noncombatancy, my investigation will not include this aspect. My concern is a biblical analysis of the problem — specifically an analysis of philological terms and their meanings, both in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and in the Greek of the New Testament. My objective is to provide sufficient biblical information to guide the reader in reaching an informed conclusion as to whether noncombatancy should be considered a Bible doctrine or merely a church tradition stemming from the understanding and interpretation of the Bible by pious believers in the past.

*Conscientious objector*, a term used frequently, means that a person's position against participation in war is based on "conscience." But what is conscience?

*Webster's New International Dictionary* (second edition) offers a simple and easily understood explanation: "Sense or consciousness of right or wrong; sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct. . . . Hence, a faculty, power, or principle conceived to decide as to the moral quality of one's own thoughts or acts." The definition in a psychological and psychoanalytical dictionary reads: "In earlier theological discussion, [conscience denoted] an innate or divinely implanted faculty enabling one to judge correctly on moral issues."<sup>2</sup>

However, the question still remains as to what is the norm that establishes what is good or evil, moral or amoral. Christianity does not reflect the moral standards of all religions and cultures. In this paper, the definition of conscience must necessarily be limited to principles found in the Bible. If these principles were absolutely clear, there would be no differences of views and opinions. Because the principles seem to allow more than one interpretation, individual decisions by individual consciences are ultimately required — decisions that presuppose an informed and spiritual understanding of the issues involved.

As a member of human society, man is not responsible to himself only. He faces a larger problem. Is his individual conscience also moral when it ignores the collective security of his family and state? As a noncombatant he

may protest the injustice of warfare, but he likewise exposes himself to the charge that he is letting others suffer as they protect him. If one lets others fight and suffer and die while he eventually reaps the benefits of their sacrifices, is there not a moral issue involved?

There are aspects of morality that resemble a two-way street. During the Civil War a custom of the time was to "buy oneself out" by paying a certain amount of money in order to avoid serving in the war. Such a practice, obviously a prerogative of the affluent, can easily be seen as unjust. As long as noncombatants constitute a relatively small minority, a nation such as the United States can afford to grant them exceptions. However, for a whole nation to be noncombatant would be more than impractical; that nation would be destroyed by its enemies and would cease to exist. Likewise, in a politically complicated world it would be difficult for an individual to decide which nation presents or defends the ideals of truth, justice, and human rights. Is it possible to establish, on the basis of religious conviction, whose side God is on or what constitutes political justice?

In the Old Testament there existed a temporary noncombatancy or, rather, exemption from war. That situation cannot be called analogous to today, because it did not deal with matters of conscience. It was a concession granted on the basis of religious law by a theocratic government. Four reasons were given for such exemptions: (*a*) the building of a new house that the owner had not yet dedicated, (*b*) the planting of a new vineyard whose fruit the owner had not yet enjoyed, (*c*) the betrothal of a man to a woman he had not yet married, or (*d*) the condition of being fearful or fainthearted (that is, cowardly).<sup>3</sup> The exemptions for cases *a* and *b* were obviously of short duration. Exemption *c* was valid for one year for a realistic reason — to guarantee the continuation of the family and the right of inheritance.<sup>4</sup> Exemption *d* was probably permanent because of the demoralizing influence of such a man.

The history of the Old Testament does not lend itself to the defense of noncombatancy, since Israel was called on to conquer a national home that was occupied by other nations. God's role in leading Israel as an army is described by Moses, who said that "the Lord is a man of war."<sup>5</sup> "It was only that the generations . . . of Israel might know war, that he might teach war to such at least as had not known it before."<sup>6</sup> In his song of deliverance, David praised God because "he trains my hands for war."<sup>7</sup> Of half of the tribe of Manasseh who fought to occupy their inheritance, the Bible stated that "many fell slain, because the war was of God."<sup>8</sup> Other texts also indicate that Israel's history was largely a history of wars — wars that at times

were ordered by God. The Hebrew word *hāraq* signifies to kill, to slay, to slaughter, to massacre. It was carried out with ruthless violence in war or even after battle — slaying in judgment, at God's command. Many texts record the extermination of the heathen nations of Palestine (compare the Septuagint).

There are at least thirteen different words in the Hebrew Bible meaning to kill, to slay, to massacre, to commit violence, to murder, to slaughter, to pierce, to wound, to put to death, to smite, to devote to destruction, to cause to fall.<sup>9</sup> To many Bible students, some of these terms seem to express only one idea — to kill. In reality, most of the terms have specific meanings, and to distinguish between them is necessary for a proper understanding of the Old Testament.

The word *shāchat* is known to us from *schächten*, the kosher butchering of an animal. In this sense it is used also for the killing of the Passover lamb and sacrificial animals. It is likewise used in certain instances when people are killed. When Elijah succeeded in demonstrating to Israel that there is but one God, he killed the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah.<sup>10</sup> The term used here is not one of the commonly used expressions for killing, but the specific word *šāchat* — to kill ritually — since to the prophet Elijah it was a sacrificial slaughter of the idolatrous priests and prophets of the Canaanite deities. Nevertheless, his procedure did not find God's approval.<sup>11</sup>

Considering these aspects of Israel's history, we might ask what God intends by the sixth commandment admonition — "You shall not kill." The Hebrew has only two short words, *lō tiršāch* — the kal future, second person, singular, masculine, of *rāšach*. But *tiršāch* does not mean to kill; it means *to murder*. In several modern translations it is thus rendered in its correct form: *Moffatt, The New English Bible, The Torah, The Living Bible, The Amplified Bible, and others*.

What is the difference between "to kill" and "to murder"?

A person can kill or be killed in many ways — accidentally by a car or officially by execution. But this does not make the person who commits such an act a murderer. In such cases present-day law speaks either about negligent homicide or justifiable homicide. In some cases it speaks of involuntary manslaughter. But to murder is different. It is to kill by a willful, deliberate, premeditated act, with malice aforethought. The Old Testament also made this distinction and provided protection, in the form of cities of refuge, for those who had committed involuntary manslaughter.<sup>12</sup>

The distinction between "murdering" and "killing," and the moral im-

plication, were and are of paramount importance. The philological differentiation between the Hebrew terms is “on purpose,” on one hand, and “unintentional” or “inadvertent,” on the other. Rabbinic law also distinguished between “voluntary homicide” and “involuntary homicide.”<sup>13</sup> The criteria of voluntary homicide were enmity or hatred on the part of the perpetrator,<sup>14</sup> lying in wait or ambushing, guile or premeditation,<sup>15</sup> and the procuring of the instrument or means calculated to produce fatal results.<sup>16</sup>

For churches or individuals to build their basis for noncombatancy on philological arguments, therefore, is tantamount to a misinterpretation of the sixth commandment. The Old Testament provides no such support.

## II

Let us now turn to the New Testament. In the Greek text there are at least seven different words denoting “to kill.”<sup>17</sup> Like the Hebrew terms, some can be used interchangeably. Some have the same specific meaning — for instance, *thuō*, the slaughtering, the killing, the kosher butchering, specifically of such sacrificial animals as the Passover lamb.<sup>18</sup> *Thuō*, therefore, is used in the same sense as the Hebrew *šāchat*.

The sixth commandment is repeatedly quoted in the New Testament by Jesus himself; it is also used by Paul and James.<sup>19</sup> It is written in two different grammatical forms: (a) *mē phoneusēs* (the second person, singular, aorist one, subjective of *phoneuō*),<sup>20</sup> and (b) *ou phoneuseis* (the second person, singular, present indicative of the same verb).<sup>21</sup> The important point is that Jesus, according to the writers of the New Testament, used the Greek term *phoneuō*, which denotes “to murder,” in the same way as the Hebrew *rāšach* in the sixth commandment. A number of passages have derivative forms, but all of them retain the definite connotation of murder.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting that most New Testament texts referring to the death of Jesus use another Greek term, *apokteinō*, which comes nearest to the idea of “to murder,” and refers mostly to the killing of Christ and of those who believed in him.<sup>23</sup> Stephen, however, charged the Jews with outright murder, *phoneuō*, as a premeditated and planned act of killing Christ.<sup>24</sup>

One must conclude, therefore, that the sixth commandment — both in the Old Testament Hebrew and in the New Testament Greek — has to be translated and interpreted as *You shall not murder*.

Although the Old Testament records many cases of war (and thus the participation of individual Israelites in acts of warfare), there is no extensive indication in the New Testament as to the attitude Christians should

take in such situations. This is explained by the simple reason that in the Old Testament *one nation*, singled out for a definite purpose, acted on divine command — whereas in the New Testament it had become a matter of a church within a political organization and many heterogeneous nations.

Under such circumstances, biblical counsel for the church or for the individual is practically nonexistent. When the soldiers (who, together with many others, came to John the Baptist to be baptized) asked, "And we, what shall we do?" John said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."<sup>25</sup> This answer indicates that they were to be good Christian soldiers. Whether one should quote the apostle Paul for or against military service or use his words merely as an illustration is, perhaps, a matter of opinion. His question ("Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?"<sup>26</sup>) admits of the service of a soldier as a legitimate occupation without excluding him from the principles of the Christian religion.

The episode relating the encounter of Jesus with a Roman centurion, a pious and compassionate man pleading for the healing of one of his servants, might be of significance to those trying to understand and solve personal problems. This Gentile soldier is lauded by the Lord above the chosen people: "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." Then Jesus added, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>27</sup>

Evidently it was possible for a Roman soldier to be a follower of Christ even though he might have to face difficult problems in his service. A similar report concerns another centurion, Cornelius, "a devout man who feared God with all his household."<sup>28</sup> In the story of Cornelius there is also reference to another "devout soldier." The incident terminates with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his men, their baptism, and bestowal of the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues — signs that these soldiers had been accepted into the household of God.

### III

The question of whether a Christian may or may not participate in acts of warfare has no simple answer. In fact, it has become a more and more complicated problem because of the historical developments of the wars of the twentieth century. War has always been a cruel affair, not only because of the many dead and wounded combatants, but also because of the enormous devastation wrought on civilians — their property, their children, their loved ones. The consequences of warfare have become staggering. The

youth of nations must give their lives, and countless numbers of them are crippled and subjected to unspeakable misery. Young men are demoralized in more than one sense, not the least of which are by venereal disease and the use of dangerous drugs. Thousands return home with their consciences destroyed — well prepared for a criminal life.

There is no sound argument nor a Bible text in defense of the morality of war. Yet, wherever the Christian finds himself, be it in political or religious life, he may encounter problems for which there seems to be no collective solution. The church may take a position and state principles, but it is the individual who must make the decision and who must accept the consequences of his convictions. There are numerous interpretations of Scripture that indicate how difficult it is to define a "Christian position" regarding war. The views of different groups or denominations are not static, but change constantly. No party can claim an authoritative declaration from the Word of God as an absolute answer to this problem. Even the definition of noncombatancy is not uniform; it may range from pacifists, who refuse to wear a soldier's uniform, to those who do not practice with a rifle, to others who are "conscientious cooperators" — that is, who serve as medics or in other branches not requiring the use of arms. The best one can do is to accept God's Word as truth in a twilight zone that demands compassionate understanding and patience with those whose views differ from one's own. A study of ethics offers no solution — man is subject to condemnation whatever position he may take. There is no categorical imperative of reason by which he can make his decision, for there is no absolute right or wrong.

Is noncombatancy to be considered a Bible doctrine or a church tradition? A few decades ago I had an opportunity to discuss this question at length with a prominent layman, an ordained elder of the local church. He was a brilliant lawyer, a man of absolute integrity and deep spiritual convictions, in addition to being one of the highest-ranking state officials. He believed noncombatancy to be a Bible doctrine. When I asked him if he had questioned every baptismal candidate concerning a personal conviction on non-combatancy, he admitted that he had not. He was disturbed when I indicated that if noncombatancy were a legitimate Bible doctrine, then he had committed a serious omission. This man had been in constant contact with the federal government of his country in order to obtain noncombatant status for the church's young men. The government was willing to grant this request on the condition that every such young man give up his civil rights, which meant that all young men of the church automatically became secondclass citizens. This Christian man was willing to pay even that price in

order to obtain one kind of freedom — only to lose all other civil rights including religious freedom. However, the possibility of reforming the philosophy of a church where women had civil rights but men did not, caused him to change his views. Later on, largely through his influence, his country's government made more favorable concessions to the church.

#### IV

My investigation seems to suggest several conclusions. Perhaps foremost is that the sixth commandment cannot be used in defense of noncombatancy. To interpret the Hebrew and Greek terms of the older versions as meaning "You shall not kill" is incorrect, inasmuch as the original languages do not say, "You shall not kill," but "You shall not murder." Legally and morally it is evident that these two concepts are totally different. Thus, the basis on which the founders of the Adventist church rested their arguments is eliminated.

Historically, there are no points of comparison or parallels between Old and New Testament history and concepts of warfare. Also historically, but in the perspective of our own time, participation in wars of incalculable proportions places a tremendous strain on the individual and his conscience that cannot be relieved by dogma or by church organization. Each man must seek his way — with his God. Whether a man decides to go one way or the other, church authority alone is not sufficient to make him a true noncombatant. More than in any other period of history, faith must now become the power that governs man's convictions and emotions, enabling him to make his decision in the light of God's Word as he understands it.

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- 16 Numbers 35:16-20; compare Exodus 21:20.
- 17 Young, pp. 563, 680.
- 18 Matthew 22:4; Mark 14:12; Luke 15:23, 27, 30.
- 19 Matthew 5:21, 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Romans 13:9; James 2:11.
- 20 Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; James 2:11.
- 21 Matthew 5:21, 19:18.
- 22 Matthew 22:7; Acts 3:14, 7:52, 28:4; 1 Peter 4:15; Revelation 21:8, 22:15.
- 23 Young, p. 564.
- 24 Acts 7:52.
- 25 Luke 3:14 RSV.
- 26 1 Corinthians 9:7 RSV.
- 27 Matthew 8:10, 11 RSV; compare Luke 7:1-10.
- 28 Acts 10:1-48.