

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION AND NONCOMBATANCY

Since the beginnings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church the denomination has been challenged with the issues of what members should do in time of war. Each member is to admonished by Jesus to be a loyal citizen of their country (“Render therefore unto Caesar what is Caesar’s...”) and at the same time remain loyal to God (“and unto God what is God’s.” Matthew 22:21). Obviously, this can create tension for someone who also reads in the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not kill (murder)” and then faces a military requirement to train with a weapon.

The Adventist position has developed historically along these lines:

1860-63 The Adventist Church formally and legally organizes in North America

1862 James White’s editorial in the Review “The Nation” where he says, “The fourth precept of that law says ‘Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy’; the sixth says ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ But in the case of drafting the government assumes the responsibility of the violation of law of God, and it would be madness to resist.” (*Review and Herald*, August 2, 1862, vol. 20, page 84).

1864 Adventist leaders appeal successfully to the Governor of Michigan and receive recognition as being conscientiously opposed to the bearing of arms. Similar letters to the governors of Wisconsin, Illinois and Pennsylvania are sent and received with approval.

1886 Ellen G. White, while visiting Switzerland, commends several men who must do their military time in the Swiss Army. While she comments on their regimental ribbons and uniforms, she makes no remarks about use of weapons. (Letter 23, 1886).

1918 President Woodrow Wilson issues an executive order allowing for religious conscientious objectors to serve in the U. S. military.

1938 July...the General Conference authorizes \$30,000 to construct barracks and begin training of noncombatants at Loma Linda and the Washington Sanitarium for pre-induction training in the medical corps.

1950 Dr. Everett Dick begins the Medical Cadet Corps at Union College.

1953 U. S. Army begins Operation Whitecoat (1953-1973) where nearly 2,500 Adventist young men volunteer as human subjects in medical preventive medicine studies.

- 1954 The Annual Council states that the official position of the church is non-combatant. The National Service Organization is implemented to work with military Adventist personnel.
- 1969 Annual Council (October 12) reaffirms the statements of 1954, then goes on to change the wording to “the church advocates noncombatancy, but allows members to elect to be pacifists as well.”
- 1972 Annual Council affirms the statements of 1954 and 1969, but decides the question is a personal matter for each member. This leaves the decision up to the individual with strong encouragement from the denomination to consider the historical position of noncombatancy, but leaves the door open to those who elect to train with or carry arms.

Thus, it is seen that the first statements were modified from a pure combatant stance, when drafted into service, to a non-combatant position to a non-combatant recommendation without a church requirement to be a noncombatant. Careful examination of the dates helps explain the changes. Initially, during the Civil War, the Adventist Church was struggling with many issues of identity and theology. There was some confusion and much discussion. The refined decision was to serve honorably in the military, but to do so as non-combatants.

That remained in place until 1969. What happened then? The U. S. was involved in Vietnam, and only those individuals who could show religious backing for their pacifism would be released to alternate duty. Since the Adventist church’s stance was non-combatancy (serving without weapons) any Adventist drafted who claimed to be a pacifist was denied that status, because the stance was at variance with the church’s stated policy. Hence the 1969 change to allow for pacifism as a choice while encouraging members to serve as noncombatants. When members are allowed to select how they would serve, they may also elect to serve being trained with weapons and as combatants, although that is not the recommended type of service.

This remains as the church’s stance today. The Seventh-day Adventist Church advocates that members serve in the military as non-combatants, but accepts those who elect to serve in other capacities or not to serve at all – according to the conscience of the individual member. Therefore, the church ceased being the conscience of the individual and began a process of informing the individual in order for them to make individual decisions for which they are personally responsible.

It must also be recognized that in the initial stages of the church organization all Adventists lived in the Northeastern part of the United States. That has changed into a 15 million membership spread around the globe. Many nations do not provide an option to serve as a noncombatant; hence, it would be impossible for the Church to mandate that members in those countries serve in that capacity. Thus, the current recommendation (not requirement) for non-combatant service is the most viable.

U.S. public law, the Geneva Convention and military regulations designate chaplains and physicians as noncombatants. If they elect to do so, medical personnel can carry weapons to protect their patients. Some medics serve without bearing arms of any kind. Corporal Desmond Doss, a U.S. Army medic, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor (the highest USA medal) for saving over 70 lives under enemy fire as a noncombatant in one battle on the Pacific island of Okinawa, 1945. Since World War II several other noncombatant medics have been awarded high medals for valorous acts of bravery to save life during conflicts.