

Noncombatancy

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While wars are waging in different parts of the world and terrorism is showing its ugly face again and again, many Adventists think about whether or not to get involved in military action. In Korea recently five theology students refused to carry guns during military reserve training. "We believe carrying guns is not proper to [sic] us, as Christians, individuals, and theology students who are going to be pastors." [1] Whereas in many parts of the world Adventists are drafted into the army and try hard to be recognized as noncombatants and conscientious objectors, some of them doing civil service, in other countries some church members join the army voluntarily. In different parts of the world church the Iraqi war and other events have triggered a lively discussion on the question of where the Seventh-day Adventist church stands today and how we should relate to war.[2] Some claim, "There are no indications that our Adventist church today disapproves serving in the army in whatever capacity." They say that "the present state is one of uncertainty on the Adventist position regarding serving in the army." [3]

This is not quite true. While the church ministers to noncombatant members in the army, as well as to pacifists and combatants, it recognizes that individuals make free choices and have to follow their informed conscience. The longstanding official position of the church is expressed in the 1972 statement in terms of noncombatancy:

"*Voted*, 1. That we accept as our basic view the 1954 General Conference Session action entitled, 'The Relationship 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 in no way alters the Christian's supreme allegiance and

responsibility to God or modifies their obligation to practice their 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 human 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 conviction.

This statement is not a rigid position binding church members but gives guidance leaving the individual member free to assess the situation for himself." [4]

This statement has never been revoked. "From the first the Seventh-day Adventist Church has staunchly advocated noncombatancy for its members. . . In the United States a statement confirming the position taken during the Civil War was adopted by the North American Division on Apr. 18, 1917: 'We hereby reaffirm the foregoing declaration. We petition that our religious convictions be recognized by those in authority, and that we be required to serve our country only in such capacity as will not violate our conscientious obedience to the law of God as contained in the decalogue, interpreted in the teachings of Christ, and exemplified in His life' (North American Division Committee Minutes 1:517, Apr. 18, 1917)." [5] In 1923 the European Division Committee voted a similar statement in Gland, Switzerland. Actions were taken by the General Conference in 1951, 1952, 1954, and 1972.

If we compare the 1954 statement with the 1972 action, we notice that minimal changes in wording have been made here and there, but that an additional sentence has been added at the end. In 1969 the North American Division issued a statement which recommended noncombatancy but allowed church members to hold a pacifist position while being backed by the church. "The U. S. was involved in Vietnam, and only those individuals who could

show religious backing for their pacifism would be released to alternate service." [6] The additional sentence of the 1972 statement allows the church to serve all members, no matter what their conscience dictates them, while officially advocating noncombatancy.

Over the years the Seventh-day Adventist Church has released statements that are related to the issue of noncombatancy. In "A Statement of Peace" we read: "In a world filled with hate and struggle, a world of ideological strife and of military conflicts, Seventh-day Adventists desire to be known as peacemakers and work for worldwide justice and peace under Christ as the head of a new humanity." [7] An earlier document declares: "Adventists, by precept and example, must stand and work for peace and good will toward men—and thus be known as peacemakers and bridge builders." [8] And the latest official statement, issued in 2002, affirms: "Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, wants His followers to be peacemakers in society and hence calls them blessed (Matt. 5:9)." [9]

Whereas Tony Campolo takes issue with Seventh-day Adventists in North America, saying: "You stood up for the righteousness of Jesus. But little by little, the affluence that has pervaded this community has seduced you into a mindset that makes me wonder whether your allegiance is more to America than to the kingdom of God," [10] in an editorial William Johnsson states: "From our earliest history we Adventists have officially advocated a stance of noncombatancy in times of war. We support government, but our ultimate loyalty is to God, whatever that may cost us." [11] Angel Rodríguez concludes "that there is no such thing as a just war. . . The church must insist at all times on the evilness of human wars. If the function of the church in the context of war is to speak for peace and reconciliation, it must promote noncombatancy among its members, based on the biblical teaching of the value of human life." [12]

The Adventist Church is not abandoning its advocacy of noncombatancy. On the contrary! It invites all church members to follow Christ's footsteps and live their lives according to the Sermon on the Mount.

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- [1]. NSD Communication Department
- [2]. See, e.g., *Spectrum* 30/4 (2002) and 31/4 (2003); *ATS-Mail* 2/6 (2003):3-4.
- [3]. Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Endtime Issues No. 99."
- [4]. *Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee: General Actions*, October 14-29, 1972, Mexico City, 17.
- [5]. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Second Revised Edition, M-Z (Hagerstown: Review and Herald and Publishing Association, 1996), 184.
- [6]. "Noncombatancy," Information provided by Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries.
- [7]. "A Statement of Peace," in *Statements, Guidelines & Other Documents: A Compilation*, ed. by Ray Dabrowski (Silver Spring: General Conference Communication Department, 2000), 50.
- [8]. "A Statement on the Peace Message to All People of Good Will," in *Statements, Guidelines & Other Documents: A Compilation*, ed. by Ray Dabrowski (Silver Spring: General Conference Communication Department, 2000), 51.
- [9]. "A Seventh-day Adventist Call for Peace,"
http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/main_stat52.html.
- [10]. Tony Campolo, "Blessed are the Peacemakers," *Spectrum* 31/2 (2003):54.
- [11]. William G. Johnsson, "War and Peace in Iraq," *Adventist Review*, April 2003, 3. See also, William G. Johnston, "Man of Power," *Adventist Review*, June 19, 2003, 5.
- [12]. Angel Manuel Rodríguez, "Christians and War," *Adventist Review*, April 10, 2003, 11. See also, Lincoln E. Steed, "Just War," *Liberty* January/February 2003, 30-31.