

Adventist
Noncombatancy
PAST and Present
Candidly Reviewed

(REFORMATTED)

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We have endeavored many times to draw the attention of God's professed people to the striking fact that the noncombatant position now taken by the Seventh-day Adventist leadership on the military question is apostasy from the truth. It is difficult for us to believe that an intelligent and careful search by men at the head of the Adventist organization could arrive at the conclusion that non-combatancy, as it is understood today, has been the position of the denomination since the time of the Civil War. One example of this erroneous position appeared in *The Youth's Instructor* of November 18, 1941:

"From the beginning of our organized existence Seventh-day Adventists have called themselves noncombatants. They still call themselves noncombatants. They still hold the noncombatant position. They have never considered themselves conscientious objectors."

We regret to say that there is deception in this statement. While it is true that the *name* "noncombatant" as used in the Civil War is the same as used by the church today, the meaning has completely changed. The quote from *The Youth's Instructor* is only half true, misleading, and a twisting of existing facts. It cannot stand the test of investigation.

Once again we feel it is our God-given duty to show the reader conclusively that the present stand of non-combatancy by the denomination is nothing but a compromise with sinful practices and was never endorsed by the pioneers of the Advent movement.

We have been very thorough in our research in this matter, and the writer has used government records to verify our position. The following is a resume of our findings:

First of all, we must understand that Seventh-day Adventists were not an organized church when the Civil War began in 1861. The original provision made for those who were, for all kinds of reasons, opposed to entering the armed services was contained in the "Act of Congress," Section 13, March 3, 1863, which we quote in its entirety:

"SEC 13: And be it further enacted, That any person drafted and notified to appear as aforesaid, may, on or before the day fixed for his appearance, furnish an acceptable substitute to take his place in the draft; or he may pay to such person as the Secretary of War may authorize to receive it, such sum, not exceeding three hundred dollars, as the Secretary may determine, for the procurement of such substitute; which sum shall be fixed at a uniform rate by a general order made at the time of ordering a draft for any state or territory; and thereupon such person to furnish the substitute, or paying the money, shall be discharged from further liability under that draft. And any person failing to report after due service of notice, as herein prescribed, without furnishing a substitute, or paying the required sum therefor, shall be deemed a deserter, and shall be arrested by the provost-marshal and sent to the nearest military post for trial by court martial, unless, upon proper showing that he is not liable to do military duty, the board of enrollment shall relieve him from the draft."

It is obvious that this statement mentions nothing about conscientious object or even a noncombata-

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of the provisions of this section unless his declaration of conscientious scruples against bearing arms shall be supported by satisfactory evidence that his department has been uniformly consistent with such declaration."

This provision emphasizes that the general term given to all who were opposed to participation was "noncombatants," although conscientious objection to military service is mentioned twice. But notice that this same term "noncombatant" included the total objectors as well—those who paid their \$300 exemption money to be released from all army service. It is imperative that the reader understand the terminology of "noncombatancy" used at that time.

This law placed the Seventh-day Adventists in a precarious position. Why? Because, up to this time, the general public had not considered them an organized church body. Until 1863 they lacked any recognition by government agencies as a religious denomination. This new law, which abolished the old provision, was enacted specifically for those who "conscientiously opposed the bearing of arms" and were bona fide members of religious denominations.

This new law made a sweeping change in the draft. Although it narrowed down the number of beneficiaries to only strictly conscientious religious persons, it made much broader provisions by offering hospital service and caring for the freed slaves as a way to help the government in its war effort.

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tant attitude against the bearing of arms. It simply exempted from military service "any Person," or any individual citizen, no matter whether for political, ethical, business, religious, cowardly, or any other reason. By either furnishing a substitute or paying \$300, anyone could be relieved from the draft. Please note that neither hospital nor any other substitute work was offered at that time. Thus Seventh-day Adventists, when drafted, accepted this provision as sent by God, paid their \$300, and were released from all military service.

As the call for volunteers and draftees became more urgent during the war because of heavy casualties, another, much firmer, law was introduced on February 24, 1864. This new draft law exempted from military service only those who had conscientious religious principles, as the following law written verbatim will show:

"ACT OF CONGRESS, FEBRUARY 24, 1864, sec. 17: And be it further enacted, That members of religious denominations, who shall by oath or affirmation declare that they are conscientiously opposed to the bearing of arms, and who are prohibited from doing so by the rules and articles of faith and practice of said religious denominations, shall, when drafted into the military service, be considered noncombatants, and shall be assigned by the Secretary of War to duty in the hospitals, or the care of freedmen, or shall pay the sum of three hundred dollars to such person as the Secretary of War shall designate to receive it, to be applied to the benefit of the sick and wounded soldiers: Provided, That no person shall be entitled to the benefit

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As previously stated, the Adventist Church faced a dilemma as a result of this law. This was greatly intensified by another law appearing a little over four months later on July 4, 1864. At first glance it seemed to eliminate the existing provision of paying the \$300 exemption money, as is stated in the following part of SEC. 2:

"ACT OF CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1864, SEC. 2: ... And in case of any such draft no payment of money shall be accepted or received by the government as commutation to release any enrolled or drafted men from personal obligation to perform military service."

Up to Section 10 of this draft law there was no mention of any provision in favor of conscientious objection or noncombatancy. But Section 10 states very concisely:

"SEC. 10: And be it further enacted, That nothing obtained in this act shall be construed to alter, or in any way affect, the provisions of the seventeenth section of an act approved February twenty-fourth, eighteen hundred and sixty-four, entitled, 'An act to amend an act entitled "An act for enrolling and calling out the national forces, and for other purposes.'" Approved March third, eighteen hundred and sixty-three."

Let us now clearly think and piece together the evidence which will bring us to the following interesting conclusions: First, that Section 2, which expressed the ruling not to accept the \$300 exemption money, was applicable only to those who did not ob-

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ject for religious reasons; and Second, that Section 10 explains, by referring to Section 17 of the February 24th law, that all three provisions of (1) hospital work, (2) caring for freedmen, or (3) paying \$300 exemption money were left open for members of religious organizations as before. It proves that Section 2 did not intend to change the existing provisions, for it stated clearly in this tenth section, "That nothing contained in this act shall be construed to alter, or in any way affect, the provisions of the seventeenth section of an act approved February twenty-fourth, eighteen hundred and sixty-four,..." It is therefore clear that all three provisions were still offered to the Seventh-day Adventist Church by this draft law of July 4, 1864.

The only remaining question to be settled is this: What position did the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist organization choose in view of these offered provisions? Were they grateful that now they could do noncombatant work as medics in the hospitals or be assigned as caretakers of the freed negro slaves? What position did they take? Here are the facts:

After due consideration of these far-reaching questions and what they involved, a decision was reached, and a declaration was drawn up. The highest authority, the General Conference Executive Committee, clearly stated that it was not at all in favor of participation in hospital service nor in favor of caring for freedmen; but rather the Committee chose to pay

of which we take in its most obvious and literal import. The fourth of these commandments requires cessation from labor on the seventh day of the week, the sixth prohibits the taking of life, neither of which, in our view, could be observed while doing military duty. Our practice has uniformly been consistent with these principles. Hence, our people have not felt free to enlist into the service. In none of our denominational publications have we advocated or encouraged the practice of bearing arms; and, when drafted, rather than violate our principles, we have been content to pay, and assist each other in paying, the \$300 commutation money. And while that provision remained of universal application, we did not deem any public expression of our sentiments on this question called for.

"We would further represent that the Seventh-day Adventists are rigidly antislavery, loyal to the government, and in sympathy with it against the rebellion.

"But not having a long existence as a distinct people, and our organization having but recently been perfected, our sentiments are not yet extensively known. The change in the law renders it necessary that we take a more public stand in the matter. For this reason, we now lay before Your Excellency the sentiments of Seventh-day Adventists, as a body, relative to bearing arms, trusting that you will feel no hesitation in endorsing our claim that, as a people, we come under the intent of the late action of Congress concerning those who are conscientiously opposed to bearing arms, and are entitled to the benefits of said laws.

JOHN BYINGTON,
J.N. LOUGHBOROUGH,
GEORGE W. AMADON,
General Conference Committee
"Battle Creek, Michigan, August 2, 1864."
(Taken from *Seventh-day Adventists in Time of War*, p. 58).

the \$300 commutation money. By this action they declared themselves explicitly as "total conscientious objectors" to any military service in any shape or form. This is the true picture, which is in direct contrast to the position taken today by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 100 years later. Noncombatant service, as we understand it today—entering the armed service to work in hospitals, performing medical cadet services, or doing any other kind of work behind the lines to assist in the war effort—was not encouraged or even intimated in 1864 as compatible with our faith as a people, as the reader can plainly see. On August 2, 1864, one month after this last draft law went into effect, the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference issued the following document, which we use in its entirety:

"STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES"

"To His Excellency, Austin Blair, Governor of the State of Michigan:

"We, the undersigned, Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, respectfully beg leave to present for your consideration the following statements:

"The denomination of Christians calling themselves Seventh-day Adventists, taking the Bible as their rule of faith and practice, are unanimous in their views that its teachings are contrary to the spirit and practice of war; hence, they have ever been conscientiously opposed to bearing arms. If there is any portion of the Bible which we, as a people, can point to more than another as our creed, it is the law of ten commandments, which we regard as the supreme law, and each precept

"Summing up this statement, it leaves not a shadow of doubt that Seventh-day Adventists, as a denomination, adhered solidly to a conscientious objection position to anything that pertained to war and the military service.

Then, is there any truth in the assertion that the Seventh-day Adventist Church of today is still taking the position which the pioneers took during the Civil War? Although it might have been called "noncombatancy" to be a total objector in those days, nevertheless the foregoing "Statement of Principles" makes it clear that they were actually "conscientious objectors" in the fullest meaning of the term.

This policy, which was fully endorsed by the Spirit of prophecy in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 361, has been completely changed. We quote:

"I was shown that God's people, who are His peculiar treasure, cannot engage in this perplexing war, for it is opposed to every principle of their faith. In the army they cannot obey the truth and at the same time obey the requirements of their officers.... But if the requirements of the rulers are such as conflict with the laws of God, the only question to be settled is, Shall we obey God, or man?"

The denominational stand of today denotes a falling away from the old landmarks and is certainly apostasy. If it were only of minor importance and not vital to our eternal salvation, there would be no cause for alarm. But by cooperating and compromising with "the kings of the earth" in their transgression of God's

holy law, God's professed people are just as guilty as open sinners and will receive the same just condemnation. What solemn thoughts to ponder!

Truth is rightfully compared with light. "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." Proverbs 4:18. Yet, unfortunately, "... men loved darkness rather than life, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light,..." John 3:19-21.

We deem it tragic that so few Adventist believers are willing to resist the appalling darkness that envelops them and step into the bright beams of truth shining in our day. So very few realize that today religious leaders suppress truths which materially affect our eternal salvation just as did the Jewish elders in the days of Christ and as did the Man of Sin later during the Dark Ages. Again and again Christ's words can be applied: "... Ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in." Matthew 23:13.

We of the Reform Movement have long believed and maintained that "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." James 2:10. To keep the seventh-day Sabbath as a mere form while transgressing one or more of the

remaining precepts of Jehovah is not only an inconsistency but also a fallacy of the worst kind.

Let us heed the light given in this article and set our feet upon the solid rock of eternal truth. May the Lord help us to fit the description of God's true remnant people as found in Revelation 14:12: "... Here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." Then we will be found at last with the throng of the redeemed singing the song of victory on the sea of glass.