

# Why Seventh-day Adventists Are Noncombatants

*An official statement of  
the General Conference Committee  
of Seventh-day Adventists*



**NATIONAL SERVICE ORGANIZATION**  
of the General Conference of  
Seventh-day Adventists  
Washington, D.C. 20012  
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This statement was formally approved by the General Conference Committee in Washington D.C., on October 11, 1943, after the subject had been given thorough study over a period of many months.

BEFORE the entrance of the United States into World War II, legislation was enacted granting entire exemption from combat duty and the bearing of arms to all "conscientious objectors." This general classification covers noncombatant organizations. Therefore, by Congressional action, Seventh-day Adventists are included among those who are guaranteed exemption from combat duty during war on the basis of religious training and belief.

Throughout their history Seventh-day Adventists have been noncombatants. They declared this position during the Civil War. They have reaffirmed it repeatedly through succeeding years. Government recognition of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a noncombatant religious organization also dates back to Civil War days. This status has been granted them in the armed conflicts in which our nation has been involved since that time.

Inasmuch as Seventh-day Adventists are frequently asked to explain the reasons for their belief in noncombatancy, this statement is published with a hope of rendering assistance to them in giving an intelligent answer.

The following official pronouncement was adopted by the Executive Committee of the North American Division Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, at a meeting held in Huntsville, Alabama, April 18, 1917:

"TO THE PROPER AUTHORITIES:

"In behalf of the Seventh-day Adventists in the

United States of America, the Executive Committee of the North American Division Conference of Seventh-day Adventists respectfully submits the following statement:

"We believe that civil government is ordained of God, and that in the exercise of its legitimate functions it should receive the support of its citizens. We believe in the principles upon which this government was founded. We are loyal to its Constitution, which is based upon the principles of democracy, and guarantees civil and religious liberty to all its citizens.

"We deplore that our nation has been drawn into the horrors of war, and shall continually pray that the God of heaven may speedily bring peace to our country.

"We have been noncombatants throughout our history. During the Civil War our people officially declared:

"That we recognize civil government as ordained of God, that order, justice, and quiet may be maintained in the land, and that the people of God may lead quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty.

"In accordance with this fact, we acknowledge the justice of rendering tribute, custom, honor, and reverence to the civil power, as enjoined in the New Testament. While we thus cheerfully render to Caesar the things which the Scriptures show to be his, we are compelled to decline all participation in acts of war and bloodshed, as being inconsistent with the duties enjoined upon us by our divine Master toward our enemies and toward all mankind.

"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."

1865  
1917

## War in Old Testament Times

One of the first questions asked those who claim exemption from combat duty on religious grounds is, "If you believe it is wrong for you to take human life in war, how do you explain the wars of the Old Testament in which God commanded Israel to engage?"

In answer to this it is necessary to note the special form of government which was given to the people of Israel. When God led Israel out of Egypt, He organized them into a nation which was to be exclusively His kingdom. Its rulers were appointed by God, and its laws were handed down from heaven. This form of government is known as a "theocracy"—a nation in which God rules directly over its subjects. There was no other government on earth like it. There has been no other like it since—there is no government on earth like it now.

## The Theocracy of Israel

The government of Israel was unique in human history in that it was an attempt of God to govern His people on earth directly. He was to be their Lawgiver, their Ruler, their Judge. Furthermore, Jehovah never intended that Israel, His people, should be formed into a kingdom, or state, or government, like the nations round about them. This people was to be separated unto God "from all the people that are upon the face of the earth." Ex. 33:16. "Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations." Num. 23:9.

This was a nation that was also a church, called in the New Testament "the church in the wilderness." Acts 7:38. This is well stated in a standard Seventh-day Adventist work:

"Israel was now [at Sinai] to be taken into a close and peculiar relation to the Most High,—to be incorporated as a church and a nation under the government of God. The message to Moses for the people was:

"Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians,

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"The Lord foresaw that Israel would desire a king, but He did not consent to a change in the principles upon which the state was founded. The king was to be the vicegerent of the Most High. God was to be recognized as the head of the nation, and His law was to be enforced as the supreme law of the land."—*Ibid.*

It is plain, therefore, that the theocracy of Israel was a government deriving its powers directly and immediately from God.

By signs, wonders, and mighty miracles, God had delivered them from the slavery of Egypt, had saved them from destruction at the Red Sea, had led them through the wilderness, had fed them miraculously, had protected them from destruction by their enemies, had driven heathen nations out of their Promised Land, had established them in its possession. They were His people, He was their God.

But let it be said here that God did not command, nor by any means sanction, all the wars in which Israel engaged. As already indicated, Israel failed to carry out God's glorious purpose for them as His chosen nation. But God did not immediately change the theocratic form of government because of their failure, though He bore long with their transgressions, until there was no remedy. He often punished them for their disobedience. He even used heathen kings as His instruments to punish His people. The history of the Hebrew nation, as recorded in the Old Testament, would have been very different if the people had fully appreciated God's plan and lived in obedience to the principles of His law.

Jehovah at times instructed Israel to go to war with their enemies, assuring them of success in these undertakings. An outstanding example of this character is recorded in the tenth chapter of Joshua. It is recorded that a league of five kings set out to overthrow the hosts of Israel.

"The Lord said unto Joshua, Fear them not: for I have delivered them into thine hand; there

and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."

"Moses returned to the camp, and having summoned the elders of Israel, he repeated to them the divine message. Their answer was, 'All that the Lord hath spoken, we will do.' Thus they entered into a solemn covenant with God, pledging themselves to accept Him as their Ruler, by which they became, in a special sense, the subjects of His authority."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, E. G. White, Review and Herald Publishing Association (ed. 1913), p. 303.

"The government of Israel was characterized by the most thorough organization, wonderful alike for its completeness and its simplicity. The order so strikingly displayed in the perfection and arrangement of all God's created works was manifested in the Hebrew economy. God was the center of authority and government, the Sovereign of Israel."—*Ibid.*, p. 374.

"The government of Israel was administered in the name and by the authority of God. The work of Moses, of the seventy elders, of the rulers and judges, was simply to enforce the laws that God had given; they had no authority to legislate for the nation. This was, and continued to be, the condition of Israel's existence as a nation. From age to age, men inspired by God were sent to instruct the people, and to direct in the enforcement of the laws."—*Ibid.*, p. 603.

But the people of Israel fell far short and failed to carry out God's plan for them. They finally asked for a king that they might be like the nations around them. And even though this request was granted, the principles on which the theocracy was founded were to be maintained. God sent His prophet to choose and anoint the king, who was to rule as the representative of the Most High.

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shall not a man of them stand before thee. . . . And the Lord discomfited them before Israel, and slew them with a great slaughter at Gibeon. . . . The Lord cast down great stones from heaven upon them unto Azekah, and they died: they were more which died with hailstones than they whom the children of Israel slew with the sword.

"Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon.

"And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies." Joshua 10:8-13.

When the nation went into battle under the direct interposition of God, even supernatural agencies were turned loose upon their enemies—for the battles were the battles of the Lord.

On the other hand, there were many occasions when His people forgot that they were but the instruments in the hands of God to carry out His purposes upon earth. At these times they took matters into their own hands and moved without divine direction and leadership. Such an occasion was the presumption of the Israelites to fight Amalek in direct disobedience to the counsel of God. The message of God delivered to them by Moses was, "Go not up, for the Lord is not among you; that ye be not smitten before your enemies. . . . But they presumed to go up unto the hill-top. . . . Then the Amalekites came down, and the Canaanites which dwelt in that hill, and smote them, and discomfited them." Num. 14:42-45.

Thus did Israel frequently engage in battle without divine guidance and always with disastrous results.

## The Theocracy Overthrown

The theocracy, that direct rule of God, no longer exists on earth. What happened to it? God does not leave us without an answer. To the covenant-

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breaking Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, God said:

"Thou, profane wicked prince of Israel, whose day is come, when iniquity shall have an end, thus saith the Lord God: Remove the diadem, and take off the crown: this shall not be the same: exalt him that is low, and abase him that is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until He come whose right it is; and I will give it Him." Eze. 21:25-27.

So the kingdom of Israel was made subject to Babylon. That was the removal of the diadem and the taking off of the crown.

After this Israel became subject successively to Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, thus accurately fulfilling the prophecy.

During the reign of Rome the last vestige of Israel's power was broken and their nationhood was entirely destroyed.

By divine prediction the theocracy was limited in duration to the time of the first advent of Christ. When Christ was on trial, the people declared of Jesus, "We will not have this man to reign over us." Luke 19:14. Pilate asked the question of the Jews, "Shall I crucify your King?" The reply was, "We have no king but Caesar." John 19:15. By choosing a heathen ruler the Jewish nation had completely withdrawn from the theocracy. They had finally rejected God as their King, and God was thereby compelled to reject them as His peculiar nation. The theocracy had come to its end, and the divine fiat was that it should be no more until Christ comes and sets up His literal, visible kingdom on earth, and then it shall be given to Him. This will not take place, however, until after the Second Advent of Christ. Then He shall sit on the throne of His father David and shall reign forever and ever. (Luke 1:32, 33; Rev. 11:15.)

This is the coming kingdom of glory that will be set up by Christ when He shall have put down all authority, and when He shall reign from sea to

sea and the earth shall be full of the glory of the Lord. (See Zechariah 9 and 10 and Num. 14:21.) Until that time therefore, God does not directly administer the government of any nation as He did in the days of Israel.

#### A Spiritual Kingdom Established

Today, the kingdom of Christ in this world is a spiritual, not a temporal kingdom. There is no nation today in which the people are all citizens of God's spiritual kingdom. Likewise there is no nation today whose citizens are all enemies of God. The wheat and the tares are to grow together until the harvest, and the harvest is the end of the world. (Matt. 13:29, 30, 39.)

True, God today is gathering out of the world a people for His kingdom of glory that is to come, but He is gathering them from all the kingdoms of earth and not from any one nation. (See Rev. 14:6; Matt. 28:18; Acts 10:34, 35.)

God's kingdom today is invisible. Individuals become His subjects as they voluntarily surrender to His rule. And "God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him." Acts 10:34, 35.

"If My kingdom were of this world," declared Jesus, "then would My servants fight: . . . but now is My kingdom not from hence." John 18:36.

If, therefore, the true subjects of God's spiritual kingdom engaged in combat, they would be found fighting one another. Since they are scattered among all nations, they would be found in all armies. Thus Christians would be killing Christians.

God's people are commanded to preach the gospel of Christ to all people and baptize believers in all nations. (Matt. 28:18-20.) If, however, they engage in killing the people of these nations, how then shall they save them through the preaching of the gospel?

In the days of Israel God used His people as

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His instrument of punishment and destruction of certain nations, because those nations had wholly rejected righteousness and had filled up the cup of their iniquity. (Gen. 15:16; Deut. 9:4.) When, therefore, the people of God engaged in this destruction, they did so at the direct command of God and acted entirely as His chosen agents.

But since the overthrow of the theocracy and the establishment of Christ's spiritual kingdom upon earth, God no longer directly administers the affairs of nations as He did Israel under the theocracy, and therefore no orders are received from Him to the end that certain peoples should be destroyed.

In the days of the theocracy Israel was first to inquire of God and await His command before going into battle. Today, however, God does not command the armies of earth. Consequently, the Christian could never be sure if he destroyed human life that he would be doing God's will. Surely he could never do so with the assured conviction that he was carrying out a direct command of God. In the absence of such a direct command, Seventh-day Adventists conscientiously believe that they should not bear arms or go forth on missions of destruction, but rather believe that their mission is the same as that of their Master, as He stated it in these words: "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." Luke 9:56. And "as He is, so are we in this world." 1 John 4:17.

#### Teachings and Example of Christ

The teachings and example of Christ constitute the guide of the Christian. This is so in relation to war as in all else. It is because of this that Seventh-day Adventists, in their North American Division Conference session at Huntsville, Alabama, in April, 1917, adopted the declaration quoted at the beginning of this leaflet, and submitted it to the United States Government as the historic position of this people. In this declara-

tion the petition is made to the Government "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." On the basis of this declaration Seventh-day Adventists seek exemption from combat service, because the teachings and example of their Master, which are the divine interpretation of the law of God, were, in both word and deed, opposed to such a course.

Christ came into the world to save lives, not to destroy them. (Luke 9:56.) When Peter drew his sword to defend his Lord, "Jesus [said] unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." Matt. 26:52.

He summed up His teaching in two stupendous statements. The first of these is known as the Golden Rule.

"All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Matt. 7:12.

The second teaches supreme love to God and un-failing love to all men.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Matt. 22:37-39.

This love is to be manifested by the follower of Christ even to his enemies.

"Ye have heard that it hath been seen, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth

rain on the just and on the unjust." Matt. 5: 43-45.

The pursuits of peace are to be the engagements of Christians. Evil is not to be met with evil, but to be overcome with good.

"Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." Rom. 12: 17-21.

While Christ's followers cannot in any sense share His atoning work with Him, nevertheless they are called to be "workers together with Him" in bringing the blessings of His gospel to lost men. This cannot be done by force. It must be done in the way His followers have been instructed, "approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; by pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned." 2 Cor. 6:4-6.

In this list there is nothing even to suggest the use of force. Jesus is set forth for "an example, that ye should follow His steps: . . . who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously." 1 Peter 2:21-23.

#### A Twofold Loyalty

Thus the coming of Christ into the world has made a difference. It is not a difference in God, in Christ, in morality, in ethics, in basic truth. It is a difference in relationship, in attitude, in obligation, in responsibility, on the part of the followers of God. There is no difference in their relation to

God. But there is a distinct difference in their relation to government.

When the theocracy existed, the followers of God had but a single loyalty—to God Himself. In this there could be no conflict between the demands of their religion and the demands of their government, for both had a single Head. That Head was God.

Since the theocracy the followers of God have had a twofold loyalty: the first and highest to God, whose throne is in heaven; the second and subordinate, to earthly government.

In addition to recognizing the authority of God, Christ directs His followers to recognize and respect the rights and place and power of the state. Every true child of the church, every loyal follower of Christ, will be a loyal servant of the state. The Christian thus owes a twofold allegiance, namely, to God and also to the state.

His allegiance to God is first, unreserved, supreme. His allegiance to the state is modified only by his allegiance to God. Therefore it is secondary, but nevertheless divinely required.

Nothing in a Christian's relation to Christ requires him to oppose his government, to refuse to aid his government, to disobey orders, even in war, except where such obedience would bring him into conflict with the requirements of God.

In case of any conflict between the requirements of the two, the Christian must always "obey God rather than men." Acts 5:29.

Many persons hold that men are bound to obey whatever the constituted authorities of state may choose to command. There are men who do not hesitate to advocate that if there should arise a conflict between individual conscience and the demands of the state, conscience should give way and the state should be obeyed. To them it seems presumptuous for the lone individual to erect his private convictions against the convictions of so many. But right is independent of majorities; personal conscience is more important than public

approval; loyalty to God is greater than loyalty to civil government; and when a conflict arises between the demands of government and the commands of God, God must be made first. To this also agree the words of Chief Justice Hughes, of the Supreme Court of the United States, in the minority opinion he delivered in the case of the United States vs. Douglas Clyde MacIntosh, May 25, 1931, as follows:

"Much has been said of the paramount duty to the state, a duty to be recognized, it is urged, even though it conflicts with convictions of duty to God. Undoubtedly that duty to the state exists within the domain of power, for government may enforce obedience to laws regardless of scruples. When one's belief collides with the power of the state, the latter is supreme within its sphere and submission or punishment follows. But, in the forum of conscience, duty to a moral higher power than the state has always been maintained. The reservation of that *supreme obligation*, as a matter of principle, would unquestionably be made by many of our conscientious and law-abiding citizens. The essence of religion is belief in a relation to God involving duties superior to those arising from any human relation."

#### Recognition of the Rights of Conscience

It is gratifying in this connection to know that some governments give appropriate recognition to the rights of conscience. We refer, for instance, to the provisions of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 in the United States of America. Section 5, sub-section "g" of this act provides that:

"Nothing contained in this act shall be construed to require any person to be subject to combatant training and service in the land or naval forces of the United States, who, by reason of religious training and belief, is conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form. And such person claiming such exemption from com

batant training and service because of such conscientious objections, whose claim is sustained by the local board, shall, if he is inducted into the land or naval forces under this act, be assigned to noncombatant service as defined by the President."

It is this principle which has been recognized in connection with participation in war and war service by the leaders of the United States Government, and expressed so clearly by Major-General Lewis B. Hershey, director of the National Selective Service System, in his first report to President Roosevelt. General Hershey says:

"The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 recognizes the rights of an individual to have religious beliefs opposed to war, and to object to forms of military service inconsistent with such beliefs."

He says further in the same report:

"It is part of these larger and human conceptions of human liberty and human personality which are at stake in this war, that the judgment of individual conscience opposed to the national will, should be given consideration and allowed a form of co-operation consistent with its judgments, if they are the result of religious training and belief."—*Selective Service in Peacetime*, p. 188, August 29, 1942.

"We recognize at the basis of conscientious objection, the very simple statement of the New Testament: 'It is better to obey God rather than men.' It might be invincible ignorance or misunderstanding or emotion, but if the individual regards his acts as his answer to a call from God or as God's will, in accordance with his religious training and belief, then the Nation, in accordance with its tradition, feels bound to recognize it."—*Selective Service in Wartime*, p. 256, April 3, 1943.

These are the principles upon which Seventh-day Adventists have reached their conclusion and taken their position. It is because of these principles that they place themselves at the service of their

country in noncombatant lines, feeling that in so doing they are truly serving their God.

On the various battle fronts of earth Seventh-day Adventist youth are present who do not participate in the fighting, who destroy no lives, who endeavor to cause no injury, but who have made no effort to avoid the fighting fronts. Their mission is to bind up, to bring relief to the helpless. They go into places of gravest danger on errands of mercy and healing. Instead of sword and steel, they carry the equipment of healing and salvation. They bear no arms. Their first concern is not their own safety. They place their lives in jeopardy, entirely without weapons of defense, trusting in the armor of Heaven. They minister to human suffering, human need, human welfare. Hundreds are serving as physicians; many as trained nurses; and thousands in other lines of medical service, having received preinduction training by officers of their church which has especially fitted them for this phase of service.

The noncombatant position taken by Seventh-day Adventists is thus based on deep religious conviction. It leads no man who sincerely holds it to attempt to evade the patriotic duty and responsibility which is both the obligation and the high privilege of every able-bodied citizen—cooperation for the common welfare of his country. It leads to neither moral nor physical cowardice. On the contrary, it engenders loyalty and courage. It holds men true to the steady performance of duty even to the jeopardy of life, inasmuch as that duty, both to fellow men and government, is seen to be duty to God. On this broad platform of twofold allegiance—to God and to country—we encourage our members everywhere to hold true to their supreme loyalty to God while maintaining their devoted loyalty to their government and their fellow men.

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