

ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF MILITARY SERVICE

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Should Seventh-day Adventists voluntarily serve in the military? Should you consider pursuing a military career? Increasingly, Adventist youth are facing these challenging questions. The issue is made even more complex because one’s attitude toward the military and participation in war are significantly shaped by the culture in which a person is raised.¹

While most people who join the military will probably do so for noble reasons (such as protecting their family and nation; defeating aggressors and enemies; securing peace, etc.), it is important to remember that *no* nation is completely free from evil and selfish interests. While the desire to help a “good cause” is noble, Christians should be aware that every nation desires to foster its own interests over and above the interests of other nations. When this fact is accepted, it raises the first of a number of fundamental ethical problems with military service: It is very likely that a person will be forced to obey orders to fight and use violence for reasons that are not entirely good or are clearly out of harmony with God’s Word. This challenge is intensified when connected with the ethical challenges of nationalism and patriotism. While national contexts vary, and individual situations are unique, decisions about military service should be carefully examined

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from a biblical perspective. Often military service and bearing of arms, as well as the nature of military conflicts and war, create ethical and moral dilemmas for Christians that are difficult if not impossible to resolve.²

For Seventh-day Adventists, it is important to remember that although as citizens we carry passports, obey the law, and acknowledge the authority of earthly rulers; yet our *primary* citizenship is the kingdom of heaven, which transcends all national boundaries. The apostle Peter reminds Christians that when there is a conflict of interest, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts

5:29, ESV).³ As Seventh-day Adventists, we are first and foremost sons and daughters of God: Our deepest loyalty belongs to Him and to His kingdom of peace. More important than our ethnic origin or citizenship is our Christian identity as children of the living God, which raises the question of our ultimate allegiance.

OUR ULTIMATE ALLEGIANCE

Before deciding whether to serve voluntarily in the military, one should prayerfully reflect on these questions: Which loyalty comes first: my loyalty to a particular nation and its political and military leaders, or my loyalty to God and His written Word? To whom am I willing to pledge my full allegiance: to a nation, to the military, or to God? Are the interests of God and the values of Christ identical with the interests of my nation and the values of the military?

It is difficult to keep God's commandments while being compelled to follow orders that conflict with them. Here everyone is confronted with these questions: *What is most important in my life? What won't I give up or compromise under any circumstances?* With these questions in mind, let's consider the following aspects of military service that pose some serious ethical challenges relating to a Christian's ultimate allegiance.

A PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Regardless of what army or nation one serves, joining the military always involves a pledge of allegiance. This pledge is invariably to the head of the nation and/or to the orders of the senior officers, and *not to God*. Every person who joins the military pledges to follow unquestioningly all legal military orders and is bound to do so throughout his or her entire military career.

Soldiers promise, among other things, to fight for and defend their country, to use weapons, and to be willing to kill the enemy. They have to be proficient in their warrior tasks, ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemy. These military commitments and the baptismal vows in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are difficult to harmonize, as they are pursuing diametrically opposed goals! This ethical dilemma raises further ethical questions relating to the nature of the church.

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH AND MILITARY SERVICE

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a worldwide denomination composed of men and women from all nations, tongues, and tribes. If Christians, including Adventists, choose to serve the military of their countries of citizenship, they might be forced to shoot and kill fellow Christians and fellow Seventh-day Adventists. This problem is intensified, given that in modern warfare the civilian population frequently suffers disproportionately

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heavy casualties and collateral damage from military strikes. How can one deal with the moral responsibility of participating in military operations that are often unpredictable and, almost by necessity, involve injuring and killing innocent civilians in combat situations, among them perhaps other fellow believers? Furthermore, how credible are we as a church in our outreach and mission when we *preach* God's love and a message of reconciliation but *act* in diametrically opposed ways by bringing destruction and death? How can the message and the mission of the Christian Church be compatible with violence and death involved in war? The question raises the ethical challenge of the sacredness of all human life.

THE SACREDNESS OF ALL HUMAN LIFE

Serving in the military confronts Christians with a serious ethical problem connected with the sanctity and dignity of all human life. If all human beings reflect the image of God and, hence, carry special dignity, how can someone train to become skillful in taking human life? How can a Christian engage in injuring and killing men and women who are loved by God? How can someone follow Jesus and obey His commandment to love their enemies and bless those who curse them (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28) while actively training to eliminate his or her enemies and blow them to pieces? How can Christians—with a lethal weapon in their hands, or with the ability to push a button triggering the launch of a deadly missile or the release of a powerful bomb obliterating life and destroying other people's property—emulate Jesus' example and do good to those who hate them (Luke 6:27, 35)? Adventists are called to be followers of Christ and, therefore, should imitate His way of peace. This means walking the way of peace and forgiveness, rather than the way of war, violence, and retaliation.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus means a willingness to suffer, even to the point of death, for Christ's sake, rather than being instrumental in inflicting suffering and bringing pain and death on others. In the pursuit of Christ's peaceful way, His followers should have no part in wars. Being conformed to Christ's image means loving our enemies. This cannot be done when holding lethal weapons in one's hands and having the mindset and mentality of a warrior.

CONFLICT WITH THE LAW OF GOD

When joining the military one should be aware that the military pledge of allegiance conflicts with our allegiance to God's unchanging law that commands, among other things, not to kill another person (see Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17).⁴ A military person is trained to bear arms with the express purpose of taking other people's lives. Because in war, blood is shed and people are killed, the spirit of war is not the spirit of God. Thus, respect and love for every human life should lead Seventh-day Adventists not to participate in any violent acts that are designed to deliberately take human life.

Wars often violate other commandments of God, such as the eighth commandment, "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15) or the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet" (Exodus 20:17), which quite often are the root cause of military conflicts or wars.

Besides ethical conflicts with the commandments indicated above, there is one commandment that is particularly significant for Seventh-day Adventists: the fourth, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8).

Any military service will inevitably result in a conflict with God's commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. It is very difficult for those who join the military to really keep the Sabbath holy on a regular basis, as God desires.⁵ In the military there is no legal right to worship on any certain day. Furthermore, during the initial basic training, there is virtually no way to avoid some training on Sabbath. Many training events are 10 days or longer, thus impacting Sabbath observance. In times of war or military conflict, this difficulty is intensified, because military action does not rest on Sabbath.

Serving in the military also poses a host of conflicts with other biblical commandments, such as the one regarding clean and unclean food (see Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:1–21). This command is particularly difficult to observe during military action when food supplies are scarce and limited.


THE ARMY LIFESTYLE

There are other serious ethical challenges connected with the lifestyle and behavior that one encounters in the military. Among them are a secular lifestyle that can easily lead to a casual, then careless, daily spiritual life; and the use of force (training, bearing, and using weapons for the purpose of harming others). Indeed, the lifestyle one faces in the military is very different from the biblical ideal and often diametrically opposed to it. In addition, there is a daily barrage of sin. An organization that trains people to administer violence and death, where things are rampant that are not conducive to biblical virtues of compassion, humility, forgiveness, love, mercy, and gentleness should not be chosen willingly by Seventh-day Adventists.

CONCLUSION

Seventh-day Adventist Christians should be aware that joining the military will lead to countless problems, some of which are virtually unavoidable. Therefore, church members should not seek voluntarily to be placed in circumstances that would put their moral values in peril. The spirit of war clearly is not the spirit of Christ. Ellen G. White writes: "Satan delights in war, for it excites the worst passions of the soul and then sweeps into eternity its victims steeped in vice and blood. It is his object to incite the nations to war against one another, for he can thus divert the minds of people from the work of preparation to stand in the day of God."⁶

Instead, we should seek every opportunity to engage in Christlike behavior and to bring justice and to actively foster peace. Christian love—even toward our enemies—goes far beyond the bounds of decent humanism: It requires great courage and wisdom!

In light of the immense ethical problems, Seventh-day Adventist Christians should take a decisive stand in favor of conscientious objection to military service. War was never Jesus' approach to solve problems. Rather than cooperating with those who bear arms, as Christians we are called to cooperate with Jesus. He calls us to express and exercise His spirit of forgiveness to be His agents of peace, reconciliation, and healing. 

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. On the changing view of Seventh-day Adventists and their relationship to military service and war, see Douglas Morgan, "Pacifists, Conscientious Cooperators, or Combatants? The Seventh-day Adventist Loss of Clarity on War and Military Service." In Frank M. Hasel, Barna Magyarosi, and Stefan Höschele, eds., *Adventists and Military Service: Biblical, Historical, and Ethical Perspectives* (Madrid: Editorial Safeliz, 2019), 117-134.
2. For a more detailed description of those ethical challenges see Frank M. Hasel, "Ethical Challenges in Military Service" in *Adventists and Military Service*, *ibid.*, 151-182.
3. All Scripture references in this article are quoted from the *English Standard Version of the Bible*.
4. For a strong case in support of the meaning "You shall not kill," see Jiří Moskala, "'You Shall Not Kill' or 'You Shall Not Murder'? The Meaning of Ratsakh in the Sixth Commandment" in *Reflections: The BRI Newsletter* 67 (July 2019): 1-7: <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/July%20-%20September%202019%20Newsletter-%20Final%202.pdf>.
5. There are honorable stories of Seventh-day Adventists who had to join the military or who served in the military and who tried to keep the Sabbath holy. See Daniel Heinz, "Adventist Opposition to War in Europe: Cases of Nonconformity and Conscientious Objection," in *Adventists and Military Service*, pages 135-150, and Victor Hulbert, "14 Soldiers in God's Army" in *Adventist Review* (October 22, 2014): <http://www.adventistreview.org/141530-18>.
6. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), 589.

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