

## THE BEGINNINGS OF A PEACE CHURCH: ESCHATOLOGY, ETHICS, AND EXPEDIENCE IN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST RESPONSES TO THE CIVIL WAR

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Despite the church's long tradition of "noncombatancy," the terms "pacifism" and "peace church" have never gained prominence in descriptions of Seventh-day Adventist identity.<sup>1</sup> The distinction that made a good Adventist a noncombatant but not a pacifist, a distinction that did not take place until the twentieth century, became associated with "the faith once delivered to the saints." When we look closely at the church's founding era, however, the distinction looks more like an innovation than a legacy of the founders, for there is much evidence to support the idea that Seventh-day Adventism, in fact, began as a peace church.

It was during the middle decades of the twentieth century that church publications began issuing sharp denials that Adventists were pacifists or antimilitarists or anything of that ilk. While wishing to sustain the long-standing norm that Adventists as individuals could not in good conscience bear arms, American church leaders wanted the sharpest possible distinction drawn between their "noncombatant" position and that of liberals and radicals who advocated disarmament and peace between nations, and often denounced the actions of ruling authorities while they were at it.<sup>2</sup>

During this same era (ca. 1930-1950), the Church of the Brethren, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and the Mennonite Churches faced similar pressures. Conscientious objection to military combat had been a defining feature of these movements since their inception—a commitment by now sustained over a span of centuries. However, many in these churches also wanted to clarify the difference between their nonresistant discipleship and political pacifism or disloyalty to the nation. Toward that end, in 1935, representatives of these denominations adopted the term "historic peace churches" to designate their shared "official witness that peace is an essential aspect of the gospel" and their rejection of "the use of force and violence." With regard to the military draft, the historic peace churches worked with the

<sup>1</sup>Church policy recognizes pacifism as one way that conscientious Adventists might work out the implications of their faith, but it is not widely regarded as normative ("Recommendations of General Interest from the Autumn Council, 1972—1," *Review and Herald*, November 30, 1972, 20).

<sup>2</sup>Carlyle B. Haynes, a leader for several years of the denomination's agencies for handling matters pertaining to military service, seemed particularly adamant on this point. See, e.g., "Conscription and Noncombatancy," *Review and Herald*, October 10, 1940, 10.

government in establishing civilian alternative service programs.<sup>3</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists, meanwhile, gravitated toward the term “conscientious cooperators” to designate eagerness to do their part as patriotic Americans during wartime. If drafted, they would enter the armed services as medics or serve in other roles that would not involve carrying or using weapons.<sup>4</sup>

Was it something at the core of their tradition that predisposed, even predetermined, Seventh-day Adventists to take this turn, that set them on a course now demarcated much more clearly than before from that of the historic peace churches? That question is the impetus for this historical exploration of the 1860s.

It was, of course, during the 1860s that the great national crisis of civil war confronted Adventists with the question of what their radical faith meant for the moral dilemma of war. The first state Conference (Michigan) organized in October 1861, six months after the war began. The first General Conference session met in May 1863, two weeks after the stunning Confederate victory at Chancellorsville and six weeks before the great turning point marked by Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg.

The Civil War and its challenges comprise a relatively familiar topic in Adventist history. Yet the historical narratives to which we are indebted for that familiarity have also obscured crucial dimensions of the story.

Let us begin our analysis of the Seventh-day Adventist response to the Civil War by examining three decisive resolutions the church made toward the end of the war:<sup>5</sup>

*May 17, 1865, a month after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, the third annual General Conference session passed a resolution that concludes:*

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.

*May 1867, the fifth General Conference resolved*

that the bearing of arms, or engaging in war, is a direct violation of the teachings of our Saviour and the spirit and letter of the law of God. Yet we deem it our duty to yield respect to civil rulers, and obedience to all such

<sup>3</sup>Sara Speicher and Donald Durnbaugh, “Historic Peace Churches,” *World Council of Churches Ecumenical Dictionary* <[www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/dictionary-article8.html](http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/dictionary-article8.html)>; see also John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*, rev. and expanded ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 107-114.

<sup>4</sup>The Medical Cadet Corps was formed to prepare Adventist young people for more effective military service and positive witness for their faith if drafted. Cf. Everett N. Dick, “The Adventist Medical Corps as Seen by Its Founder,” *Adventist Heritage* 1 (July 1974): 19-27; Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 89-96.

<sup>5</sup>The resolutions quoted below may be found in the “General Conference Session Minutes, 1863-1888” (Online Document Archive, Seventh-day Adventist General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, <[www.adventistarchives.org](http://www.adventistarchives.org)>).

laws as do not conflict with the word of God. In the carrying out of this principle we render tribute, customs, reverence, etc.

*May 1868, the sixth General Conference declared*

That we feel called upon to renew our request to our brethren to abstain from worldly strife of every nature, believing that war was never justifiable except under the immediate direction of God, who of right holds the lives of all creatures in his hand; and that no such circumstance now appearing, we cannot believe it to be right for the servants of Christ to take up arms to destroy the lives of their fellow-men.

Some works of Adventist history<sup>6</sup> do make mention—usually of the first—of these resolutions. They do not, however, seem to see much significance in the fact that the church made definitive and repeated declarations of pacifism<sup>7</sup> during its first decade of organized existence. I propose that the resolutions of 1865-1868 support the generalization that Seventh-day Adventism began as a peace church.<sup>8</sup>

The two contemporary Adventist historians who have written with the greatest skill and acumen on this topic, Ronald Graybill and George Knight, conclude that beneath the unequivocal resolutions of the 1865-1868 General Conferences, Adventists remained quite unsettled about questions of war and military service. In their accounts, expedience seems much more prominent than ethical conviction in prompting Adventists to go on record with their emphatic, sweeping statements against participation in war.

<sup>6</sup>The historical treatments by Adventist writers that I have most utilized for this study are: W. C. White, D. E. Robinson, and A. L. White, "The Spirit of Prophecy and Military Service" (Ellen G. White Estate [hereafter EGWE] document, June 15, 1956, DF 320); Arthur Whitefield Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1961), 1: 312-33; Ron Graybill, "This Perplexing War: Why Adventists Avoided Military Service in the Civil War" (manuscript in EGWE DF 320, incorporating minor corrections and additions made to an article of the same title published in *Insight*, October 10, 1978, 4-8); idem, "Thoughts on Seventh-day Adventists and the American Civil War" (manuscript in EGWE DF 320); Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Education, 2000), 95-99; George R. Knight, "Adventism and Military Service: Individual Conscience in Ethical Tension," in *Proclaim Peace: Christian Pacifism From Unexpected Quarters*, ed. Theron F. Schlabach and Richard T. Hughes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 157-171.

<sup>7</sup>Peter Brock includes Adventism in the category of "separational pacifism," in which renunciation of violence is one of the features that distinguish their community from the general society (*Freedom From Violence: Sectarian Nonresistance from the Middle Ages to the Great War* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991], 270-272). In an analysis that identifies at least twenty-five different types of religious pacifism, Yoder, 96-98, cites Seventh-day Adventists as the foremost example of the "pacifism of cultic law"—absolute, unquestioning adherence to the letter of divine law. I hope to show that this categorization does not do justice to the Adventists of the Civil War era, at least.

<sup>8</sup>That is, they did bear "official witness that peace is an essential aspect of the gospel" and explicitly renounced "the use of force and violence."

Graybill points to a shift of emphasis in the statements of church leaders, from hostility to the “nonresistant position” early in the Civil War to espousal of it toward the end of the war, and concludes:

Early on, Adventists were suspected of being Southern sympathizers, so James White insisted on the church’s support of the Union, and condemned those who resisted the draft. By the end of the war, however, Adventists were struggling to prove that they were really eligible for the privileges accorded those who were conscientiously opposed to war and the bearing of arms. Consequently, they gave full play to their nonresistant sentiments.<sup>9</sup>

James White’s statement of his position early in the war (August 1862) triggered an extended debate in the *Review*, in which participants advocated a wide range of actions—from taking an armed, Sabbath-observing regiment into the righteous crusade against slavery to uncompromising nonviolence, whatever the penalty. While this debate was animating the church paper in 1862-1863, it still remained possible to purchase exemptions from military service without gaining official governmental recognition as a conscientious objector.<sup>10</sup>

When changes in the draft law during the summer of 1864 left no other means for avoiding regular combat duty, Adventist leaders, as described by both Graybill and Knight, rushed to declare, for public consumption, a unanimity in their church that did not actually exist. They did this, it appears, not so much out of dedication to peace, but principally to serve an interest of much greater importance to them: avoiding conflict with the authorities over Sabbath observance.

In presenting documents for that purpose to government officials, denominational spokesmen indulged in “a great deal of exaggeration,” says Knight, with the claim that their movement had always been unanimous in conscientious opposition to bearing arms. Had not considerable disagreement just been publicly aired in the *Review* only months before?<sup>11</sup> As for the resolution adopted by the General Conference of 1868, Knight judges that while it gives appearance of unanimity on the “military question,” in reality opinions in the church remained quite divided.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the central point one draws from these historians’ portrayal of the “Adventists and the Civil War” episode is that during these years, no clear, well-grounded position was formulated from which the church could take orientation when military conscription again became a major problem in the twentieth century. The conflicts and changing trends with regard to military

<sup>9</sup>Graybill, “This Perplexing War,” 3.

<sup>10</sup>“Articles From the *Review and Herald* Pertaining to the Seventh-day Adventist Stand on Non-Combatancy During the Civil War” (EGWE DF 320) compiles 83 pages of the critical material published in the *Review*. For the full text of the pertinent issues of the *Review* (and the large majority of all *Review* issues from 1850 through 1982) see GCA Online Document Archive <[www.adventistarchives.org](http://www.adventistarchives.org)>.

<sup>11</sup>Knight, 164.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 166.

service in twentieth-century Adventism thus emerged out of widely diverse views that had been there from the beginning, but had been officially papered over in order to get through the crisis of the Civil War.<sup>13</sup>

My reading of the evidence requires a quite different portrayal. First, the documentation that the Adventists compiled to prove the legitimacy of their claim to be principled noncombatants is so abundant, and their insistence that these documents indeed represented the movement's united stance so vigorous and solemn, that it requires much greater weight than Graybill and Knight give it. Early in 1865, Adventists published a pamphlet *Compilation or Extracts, from the Publications of Seventh-day Adventists Setting Forth Their Views of the Sinfulness of War, Referred to in the Annexed Affidavits*.<sup>14</sup> Knight makes no mention of this pamphlet. Graybill accurately observes that only a handful of articles and excerpts written by Adventists themselves could be found from their fifteen years of publications to include in the anthology. By no stretch of the imagination does the compilation show peace and nonresistance to be central themes for Adventists in the 1850s, any more than was health reform. But the presence of a few original articles, along with reprinted material, is at least as striking as the absence of more. It provides clear evidence of a widespread assumption or disposition favorable toward nonviolence as a feature of authentic Christianity at a time when Adventists were indeed preoccupied with other matters.<sup>15</sup>

A second pamphlet, *The Views of Seventh-day Adventists Relative to Bearing Arms, as Brought Before the Governors of Several States, and the Provost Marshall, with a Portion of the Enrollment Law*, contains letters of endorsement from prominent citizens, which the Adventists included in the materials submitted to state governors and the U.S. Provost Marshal to document their religious convictions against engaging in war. One of the letters, addressed to Illinois Governor Richard Gates, affirms

<sup>13</sup>My perspective owes much to the work of Brock, esp. pp. 230-258.

<sup>14</sup>*Compilation or Extracts, from the Publications of Seventh-day Adventists Setting Forth Their Views of the Sinfulness of War, Referred to in the Annexed Affidavits* (EGWE DF 320).

<sup>15</sup>The support for the New England Non-Resistance Society and other radical reforms among the Millerite Adventists suggests a deeply held pacifism that carried over to the early Sabbatarian Adventists. Graybill discusses Millerite pacifism in "The Abolitionist-Millerite Connection," in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 139-152. The pacifism of non-Sabbatarian Adventists during the Civil War yields further evidence of its pervasiveness in the roots of the Advent movement; see Peter Brock, ed., *Liberty and Conscience: A Documentary History of Experiences of Conscientious Objectors in America through the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 185-187. Brock describes a strong inclination toward nonresistance from the beginning in the Seventh-day Adventist fellowship as "a legacy of the Garrisonian era" (*ibid.*, 232). In "Radical Witness: The Political Stance of the Earliest Seventh-day Adventists," an unpublished paper presented at Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians Conference, Andrews University, 13 April 2001, I pursue this point, drawing particularly on the insights of Henry Mayer, *All On Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

the Adventists to be “as truly non-combatant as the Society of Friends.”<sup>16</sup> Historian Peter Brock points out that in the legislation enacted during the Civil War period, the term “non-combatant” designated all religious conscientious objectors. Use of the term “noncombatancy” for service in the military in roles not requiring the bearing of arms, in contrast to “pacifist” refusal of military service, is a product of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

The affidavits “annexed” to the pamphlet offer even more striking evidence, particularly for the definitiveness with which Adventist leaders, “duly sworn,” declare participation in warfare and bloodshed to be violations of their core beliefs. Uriah Smith’s statement refers to the “Church Covenant” adopted by the Michigan Conference in 1861 as indication that Seventh-day Adventists had always “taken as their articles of faith and practice, ‘The Commandments of God and the Faith of Jesus Christ.’” Smith elaborated that Adventists explain “the commandments of God to mean the ten commandments of the moral law, and the faith of Jesus Christ to be the teachings of Christ in the New Testament.” White stated that he had been a minister of the “denomination” since 1847 and “that during all of that time, the teachings of that church have been that war is sinful and wrong, and not in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Scripture.”

Second, I question whether the flurry of articles responding to James White’s controversial *Review* editorial of August 1862 (“The Nation”) demonstrates the existence of the spectrum of positions that Knight suggests<sup>18</sup> with something such as “just war” on one hand and thoroughgoing pacifism on the other. Most of this interchange assumed that taking human life was incompatible with the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ. Within that framework, the *Review* polemicists thrashed out how rigorous and prescriptive in advance it was necessary to be on the specific course of action to be taken in a complex, pressured situation. Advocacy of armed participation by Adventists in a “just” war made no more than an ephemeral appearance.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, I interpret a letter G. I. Butler wrote to J. N. Andrews<sup>20</sup> in March 1868 in a much different light than have others. The General Conference session of May 1866 had voted to request Andrews “to prepare an article setting forth the teachings of the Scripture on the subject of war.” When called to account at the following year’s session, Andrews reported that the project was “in an unfinished condition” due to a “want of time.” Still not off the hook a year later, the scrupulous scholar reported his finding that the subject required

<sup>16</sup>*The View of Seventh-day Adventists Relative to Bearing Arms*, 10 (EGWE DF 320).

<sup>17</sup>Brock, *Freedom From Violence*, 301.

<sup>18</sup>Knight, 160-162.

<sup>19</sup>I base this on a reading of the comprehensive collection of relevant *Review* articles from August 1862 to May 1865 compiled in EGWE DF 320.

<sup>20</sup>George I. Butler to J. N. Andrews, March 24, 1868 (EGWE DF 320).

“much research and study” and thus still was not done.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that the project was not complete was not due to a lack of effort on Andrews’s part. Earlier in the year he had sent a letter asking Butler for his views on the subject. Butler’s reply makes a case from the Bible for war as necessary and proper in some instances as an instrument of the divinely ordained institution of government. Graybill and Knight both lean heavily on the Butler letter as evidence for a much-divided state of Adventist belief on the issue at the end of the 1860s, the resolutions adopted at the General Conferences notwithstanding.

The letter does show that the subject was not closed and that desire existed for a fuller and deeper biblical exposition on which to ground the church’s position. Indeed, the fact that it seemed necessary to reaffirm the church’s position on the sinfulness of war at the 1867 conference and yet again in 1868 must mean that questions continued to be raised.

I do not believe, however, that Butler’s letter sustains Knight’s conclusion that the Seventh-day Adventist community came out of the Civil War era in a fragmented and uncertain state with regard to war. Rather, it provides valuable evidence for the genuine prevalence of a consensus at this point.

In the first place, Butler regarded his own theories to be on the margins of Adventist thought, recognizing “that the mass of our people are leaning rather to the non-resistant side of this subject.” He opened his lengthy epistle with a teasing affectation of surprise that Andrews would request light from *him*—a known skeptic about the prevailing view. “I wish I could have seen whether there was not a roguish twinkle in your eye when you penned that sentence,” he wrote.

The future General Conference president congratulates himself for having succeeded in urging that Andrews be appointed to write the article on war rather than someone such as Roswell F. Cottrell, who would have “treated” readers “to a rehash of non-resistance theories with no consideration of the other side.” It is here that Knight sees conclusive evidence that unanimity did not exist.

Unanimity was indeed lacking, particularly on how to work out the biblical rationale for the refusal to bear arms. However, Butler’s letter takes as a starting point that a *consensus*—a basic position agreed upon by delegates duly elected as representatives of the church body—had been established. He does not expect—I doubt even hoped—that Andrews’s research would show that Adventists had gotten it all wrong three years before in declaring themselves noncombatants or that the Bible actually does approve participation by the remnant in warfare for a just cause, so they need not have worried so much about the draft after all.

Rather, Butler dissents from the general acceptance of the “non-resistance theories” that had been set forth as a definitive basis for the Adventist position. He wanted Andrews commissioned to write on the subject because he was confident that Andrews would give thorough and fair consideration to all sides of the issue, and was the one best positioned to formulate a convincing case

<sup>21</sup>GC Session Minutes, May 16, 1866; May 14, 1867; and May 12, 1868.

that does justice to the full range of scriptural testimony.

Thus Butler did not want “more of the same” from Cottrell. He had already heard Cottrell’s argument and found it unconvincing. He wanted more solid ground—“*rock bottom*, not shifting sand”—on which to stand when faced with “the test on this subject” in the future. He wanted truth so deeply convincing as to enable him to “go to prison or anywhere else, with firmness and resignation.”<sup>22</sup> After making his ponderous case against biblical nonresistance, Butler, in the end, declared that he was nevertheless already firm in his own commitment never to participate in war. How can this be?

Butler’s contention was not that the sixth commandment is an eternal prohibition against Christians engaging in war under any circumstances in any historical context. Rather, prohibition was because a new and final epoch in God’s saving plan for history had begun. Butler could, therefore, “justify war” in some cases during past ages where liberty was at stake.

But now the circumstances are changed. A mighty, special truth to accomplish a special work, a preparation for the captain of our first allegiance who is coming to put out of the way these secondary institutions which have so sadly abused the privileges and responsibilities which He has committed to their hands, and which are becoming more rotten every day, and of whom there can be no rational hope of reforming, to put in their place His own just and beneficent government—is being preached.

Butler could not enlist in the United States military because he was already under commission for the “truly *mighty* work” of uplifting to the world the supremacy of God’s government and law. Engaging in war, he reasoned, would compel Adventists to violate the Sabbath of that law, and thus directly contradict their own distinct message by “giving honor to the creature earthly governments, which in this of all ages we should give to the Creator.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, though a self-described lonely voice on the far right wing of early Adventist thought regarding war, Butler found himself driven to pacifism by the logic of the movement’s eschatological proclamation.<sup>24</sup> The priority he

<sup>22</sup>Roswell F. Cottrell set forth his position in a three-part series, “Should Christians Fight?” *Review and Herald* May 9, 23, and 30, 1865, 180, 198, 204.

<sup>23</sup>Butlerian pacifism comes close to that later developed by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which Yoder, 115-116, labels the “pacifism of eschatological parenthesis,” except that Butler gives no hint of expecting the saints to join in the violent overthrow of earthly governments at the last day, as the Witnesses anticipate.

<sup>24</sup>In a response to Knight’s essay, Mennonite scholar William E. Juhnke suggests further study of the extent to which the “apocalyptic outlook open[ed] the door for Adventists’ pacifist position” (“Prophetic Pacifism in the American Experience: A Response to Grant Underwood and George R. Knight,” *Proclaim Peace*, 172-181). Butler’s letter contributes evidence supporting the importance of Juhnke’s question, as does Ellen White’s *Testimony* No. 9 on “The Rebellion.” The explosive significance of living in accordance with a kingdom that is on the way and that will overthrow the powers of the present age is more than fealty to eternal, abstract principles. This coming-kingdom orientation impels the nonconformity to which White challenges believers: “We are waiting for our Lord from heaven to come to earth to put down all

placed on Sabbath observance as a signifier of loyalty to the imminent reign of God absolutizes his resolve never to make war on behalf of the earthly governments that were plunging irreversibly into rebellion against God.

Andrews was never able to complete the study on war assigned to him in 1866. Without it, Knight observes, Adventists did little to develop a stronger ideological foundation that might have upheld a more consistent response to war and military service in the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> I do not believe, however, that the church lacked definite historical moorings from its founding decade.

When the American Seventh-day Adventist Church next faced military conscription in 1917, the North American Division Executive Committee found the precedent from the Civil War era of Adventist history clear enough. The church's public statement affirmed that "We have been noncombatants throughout our history," and then quoted the General Conference resolution adopted in 1865.<sup>26</sup>

In summary, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, during its formative era, understood the "remnant" vocation as a call to utter seriousness about the biblical mandates against taking human life and for loving one's enemies. They believed that the prophetic witness to "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ," for which their movement came into being, required their doing so when the overwhelming majority of Americans in the era of the Protestant empire would not.

What their stand means for us is, of course, another matter. In any case, the Seventh-day Adventist Church began as a peace church.

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authority and power, and set up His everlasting kingdom. Earthly powers are shaken. . . . Our position in the image of Nebuchadnezzar is represented by the toes, in a divided state, and of crumbling material, that will not hold together" (now in E.G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948], 1:360-361). At the same time, she cautioned against premature provocation of governing authorities, as seen in her rebuke of the Iowans, whose overzealous posturing about nonresistance had endangered the movement without the benefit of a positive witness. It would be a victory for Satan, she had written in a letter to a friend, if the fledgling Adventist cause was "shot down so cheaply" (Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Progressive Years* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1986], 2: 43-44). The reference point for the challenges and cautions White issued was the vocation of being a nonconformist prophetic minority, bearing witness to the soon-coming kingdom of Christ.

<sup>25</sup>Knight, 166.

<sup>26</sup>Cited in Francis M. Wilcox, *Seventh-day Adventists in Time of War* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1936), 112-113.