

# Living in a world of war and violence: What should a Christian do?

By Stefan Höschele

**War and violence have become common in the world today. As Christians, how we react to it and what we do to be peace makers are questions we cannot avoid.**

War has broken out! Suddenly you are facing questions you never had to face before. The discussions in your ethics classes are now becoming reality: no more time for laid-back deliberations, no more engaging in heated debates just for the fun of it. It is war, and you have to make some tough decisions.

What should you do? A good place to begin is to consider what Jesus would have done if He had faced the challenges of war and violence. The Sermon on the Mount is replete with guidelines on such issues. Jesus is unambiguous and clear: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:9, 39, 44).<sup>1</sup>

Jesus didn't stop with just instructions; He acted. When the soldiers of the high priest and leaders of the nation came to arrest Him in Gethsemane, He did not try to defend Himself. To Peter who drew his sword in His defense, He said, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). When He was crucified, He could have asked armies of angels to free Him from the cruelty of the cross. But Jesus chose to die rather than kill.

Jesus' principles regarding war and violence are applicable even today. In most countries, a Christian is under pressures of governments to bear arms. Yet there are several ways in which you can live according to Jesus' example. Your actual course of action may depend on your environment and your personal background, but there are at least eight options for a Christian to consider.

## 1. Moving

Jesus clearly taught that we should not answer violence with violence. But He did not instruct us to seek persecution, endanger our lives, or remain where we are whatever the political climate is. Seventh-day Adventists should not run away to the mountains the moment slightest problems arise; however, there may be times when followers of Jesus will do as the early believers in Jerusalem did (Acts 8). When persecution, violent conflicts, or war activities arise, a simple relocation may be the solution. Peace-loving Christians have opted for this choice for centuries. Mennonites, the first historic Peace Church, have spread into the whole world precisely because they were looking for countries in which they did not have to engage in military service.

Not so long ago, I was talking about war with my ten-year old daughter. Her immediate suggestion? "Why don't we just go to another country where they don't fight?" Of course, such a move is not a decision you can make lightly or easily; still I am persuaded the idea is valid. After all, here on earth, "we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). A decision to move may indeed make a statement: that God's kingdom is more important to us than our earthly possessions.

## 2. Staying

Not everybody can move away, and some will deliberately choose to stay. Sometimes fleeing may actually imply denying one's responsibility in society. Indeed following Jesus may mean staying and serving right where you are. Being where you are without engaging in violence can be an encouragement to others. A Christian's firm stand of non-participation in war activities is a quiet yet visible testimony for the gospel.

However, in some cases, staying may not be an obvious decision. Consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor. Born in 1906, Bonhoeffer became a university professor at the age of 24 and had the prospect of a brilliant academic career. He was one of the few to recognize early the dangers inherent in Hitler's National Socialism and he played a key role in the Confessing Church, a movement opposed to state influence on the German Protestant Church of the period. He was well respected as a scholar and a pastor in the United States and England, and he could have easily moved out of Germany to safety abroad, and thus saved himself from Nazi persecution and eventual imprisonment and death. But Bonhoeffer chose to stay in order to support the silent opposition and let his life and ministry be a witness to Christian ethic and truth. His choice cost his life, and staying in his case proved costly. This may be Christ's way for some.

## 3. Words of peace: consoling

Perhaps the most natural response of a Christian to war should be to utter words of peace and consolation. Christ said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). Whether we move away or stay, echoing these

words wherever the Lord places us is our first task and our highest joy.

During the Bosnian War in the early 1990s, Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was surrounded by enemies. The siege lasted for almost four years, and fleeing the city was most difficult, as was getting inside. However, an Adventist pastor, Mirko Milovanovi, decided to go to Sarajevo and serve there as a counselor, listening to people, encouraging them, consoling them, and praying with them. He could have chosen to remain in a more peaceful area where his life was not endangered. But he knew it was his duty to bring words of consolation to others rather than merely saving his own life.

#### 4. Words of peace: confessing, testifying, witnessing

"Words of peace" may in fact disturb some. Those supporting war, for example, may think that those talking of peace are actually fighting them! Yet Christians cannot remain silent.

As a faith community, we must speak of peace. Indeed, as Adventists we have done the right thing in issuing several statements on peace.<sup>2</sup> In one of them ("Peace," 1985), we affirm: "The Seventh-day Adventist Church urges every nation to beat its 'swords into plowshares' and its 'spears into pruning hooks' (Isaiah 2:4). ... 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."

Such a stance for peace may involve speaking out whenever countries engage in wars. We cannot support the use of violence, and we should make this clear. There can be no compromise on this matter. As responsible citizens of the state here and the Kingdom of God, our unequivocal position should be promotion of peace, rejection of military actions, and rebuking those who advocate violence. Of course, in pursuing such a course, we must be "wise as ser-

pents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16, KJV). But we should make it clear that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a peace church.

#### 5. Actions of peace: healing

The fifth way to follow Christ in times of war is through healing. This has been the Adventist approach for many generations. The American Civil War was raging when our denomination was officially established in 1863, and people were drafted into the army. What did Adventists do? A lively debate within the emerging denomination led to a consensus that Adventists were not to serve as soldiers, but instead serve as non-combatants, caring for the sick and the wounded.

This type of ministry is a direct application of Ellen White's injunction to avoid bearing arms, but still serving the country. Her words spoken during the American Civil War are applicable even today: "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. There would be a continual violation of conscience."<sup>3</sup>

#### 6. Actions of peace: reconciling

While the ministry of Jesus involved much of teaching and healing, His most significant task was the mission of reconciling the humankind to God. Thus, Christian actions of peace must include the ministry of reconciliation, even among groups who are constantly in conflict with each other. The Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig once said, "Just like war, it needs someone to initiate peace." Why should not that one person be you?

It is indeed sad to note that in history only few Christian leaders have stood up to work for reconciliation between warring parties. The South African Bishop Desmond Tutu is one of them. When apartheid resulted

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in violent clashes, Bishop Tutu spoke against the despicable policy of racial segregation while continually working to reconcile the warring groups. When apartheid ended and a new South Africa emerged, he chaired the nation's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a novel and historic approach to deal with past violence and crime and the raging desire for revenge. Instead of invoking the law of revenge and retribution, Bishop Tutu launched a national movement of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation. Can we as Adventists be known everywhere as people of truth *and* reconciliation?

### 7. Risking one's life

Several countries do not have the option of a non-combatancy status for those who have reservations against bearing arms. Military service—drafted, voluntary, or otherwise—requires training in and carrying of arms. No alternative is provided. In my country, Germany, young people now have the opportunity of serving their country by choosing to bear arms or serve in a hospital or work in an old people's home. This kind of freedom was not always the case.

Where such freedom is not available, what should one do? What would Jesus do? I am persuaded that He would live the hard way, the gospel way. Take Franz Hasel, an Adventist literature evangelist. His story, as reported by his daughter Susi Hasel Mundy in the book *A Thousand Shall Fall*<sup>4</sup> is just incredible. When he was drafted during World War II, he turned to the Lord in prayer. "Help me to be true to my faith," he prayed, "even in the army. Help me so that I will not have to kill anyone." And to make sure he did not act against his prayer, he exchanged his gun for a piece of wood that looked like a gun. That act could have cost him his life. In this terrible war, he was saved by a series of miracles, some of which you can only experience if you are ready to risk your life for your faith.

### 8. Giving your life

The eighth way of following Jesus in times of war is the most difficult one. Risking your life is breathtaking enough, but actually giving it? God does not demand this of everyone. But one day you may be asked to decide whether you want to kill or accept being killed.

Seven years ago, I lived near Arusha, Tanzania, where the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) is located. This is the court which deals with persons who are accused of having been involved in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Sadly, several Adventists also had to appear before the tribunal. One such was a retired pastor and leader. The ICTR judges declared that the pastor did not have any part in planning or implementing acts of genocide. Still, he was given a 10-year sentence for "aiding and abetting in genocide."

Why such a verdict? In the midst of violence, with Tutsi armies attacking the country from the north and Hutus slaughtering hundreds of thousands of Tutsi in the country, what could a pastor really do? This particular pastor was the moral authority in the mission compound, a campus with a hospital and a school. Although the judges could not find that he was responsible for actively promoting injustice, they judged him guilty—*because he had not done all he could*. In other words, he should have stopped the militia, risked his life, and, ultimately, sacrificed himself for the sake of others.

I am not sure how I would have acted in this particular case, but the judges made a point. As Christians, we must be ready to give our lives rather than kill or tolerate the murder that is invariably associated with war or communal violence.

### What would Jesus do?

In a world filled with violence, injustice, and war, Jesus showed no bitterness. He rather consoled. In a climate full of nationalism, He did not

take sides; He was ultimately viewed as an enemy on both sides. In an age that was full of fear, He did not keep quiet but spoke the truth. In a society where belonging to a group meant that you have to be against another group, He laid the foundation for reconciliation. And He was ready to be killed although He had all the power of the universe in His hands. Are you ready to follow Him?

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### REFERENCES

1. Unless stated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the New International Version.
2. See [www.adventist.org/beliefs/statements](http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/statements).
3. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 1, p. 361.
4. (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2001).

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