



A matter of conscience

An important message for *all* brethren and sisters

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WE LIVE IN a time when we may suddenly be confronted with the demands of the state to serve or assist in counteracting acts of terrorism or war. All brethren and sisters, of whatever age, must be fully persuaded of the Scripture teachings that lead us to be conscientious objectors.

In this twenty-first century, warfare can be more sophisticated than it was, in some cases requiring very specialist skills, and is often waged by what is known as the regular army rather than by conscripted forces. However, the support needed from the civilian area, in terms of medical, computing, engineering and other expertise, is growing. Brethren and sisters, whilst not actually conscripted to be part of the military, may find that the company or organisation they work for is required to supply key workers in such areas for the direct benefit of the military.

In these circumstances there will be no issue of call-up papers, no going before a tribunal, no time for a meeting with the elders of the ecclesia. Each individual brother or sister will be required to give an answer for their conscience to their manager or foreman or the military personnel brought in to supervise. Acts of terrorism may bring about a state of emergency, with the country organised in regions, and suddenly we could find life controlled and directed in a much more authoritarian way than before, with instructions issued to civilians which may clash with our beliefs. Our homes, our cars or our meeting rooms may not be ours to do with as we please.

A major war could, of course, involve conscription for all those between eighteen and forty-five years of age, and many might find themselves formally arraigned to give an answer for the hope they hold. Most may feel con-

fidant that they can explain why they are not prepared to take up arms and kill. But we are not pacifists, we are religious conscientious objectors, and we have renounced our citizenship of this society and country. This aspect of our faith should mould our lives, it should be reflected in all aspects of daily living. Being a conscientious objector is not something that makes a difference just in times of war or national emergencies.

Help available

There are a number of Christadelphian publications which can help us in our Scriptural study of this important fundamental doctrine of conscientious objection:

- *The Christian and War* (just reprinted)
- *Dare Any of You Go to Law?* (new)
- *The Captive Conscience* (new)
- *The Gospel and Strife*.

All four are available from the Christadelphian Office. The Christadelphian Bible Mission also has a helpful publication on this matter: *War, Aggression and the Christian Life*.

In the UK the Christadelphian Military Service Committee also exists to represent our views to the government at all levels and to help individuals and ecclesias with queries and problems that may arise on the subject of military service and conscientious objection. Similar committees have existed in the past in other countries abroad, and are in a number of places being reconstituted, so that brethren and sisters might be equipped to stand firm in these last days.

Many of our brethren and sisters in foreign lands have no recognised government process for claiming conscientious objection, particularly in some ex-communist countries or Muslim countries. For these brethren and sisters, their own conviction, faith and understanding of the Scriptures in relation to this matter are vital if they are

to give a faithful witness for God and Christ. They may stand alone, but they are not alone, whatever difficulties they face. God knows, God cares, and brethren and sisters will not be tempted above that which they are able to bear if they put their trust in God and in His Son (1 Cor. 10:13).

Although we have a large fellowship, and a history of seeking exemption and of receiving government approval for exemption, this cannot justify a lackadaisical attitude on our part in not being familiar with the Scriptures that teach us to be conscientious objectors. Our blessings in the UK today have come with great suffering and sacrifice on the part of brethren and sisters who have gone before, particularly in the First World War.

Strangers and pilgrims

The Scriptures teach that we are “strangers and pilgrims on the earth”, with “no continuing city”. This is because we have “embraced” the promises of God, and “seen [the fulfilment of] them afar off” and have been “persuaded of them” (Heb. 11:13; 13:14). Our baptisms marked the turning point in our lives. At that time we “crucified” the “old man”, and were “raised” to “newness of life” in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:3-6). From then on we should have been setting our “affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:2).

When Paul wrote to the brethren and sisters in Ephesus he emphasised the difference between being in Christ and being in the world. Believers are now part of the commonwealth of Israel, related to the promises made to Abraham, and as such are privileged to have a relationship with God through Christ (Eph. 2:12,13).

The word ‘stranger’ in the New Testament means ‘one who lives in a place without the right of citizenship’, and a ‘pilgrim’ is ‘one who journeys through life as a stranger’. Hebrews 11 clearly sets out Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as examples of men who lived lives which bore testimony to the fact they had renounced their citizenship of an earthly kingdom and nation. Verse 13 says that they “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims”. The word ‘confess’ has the root meaning of ‘profess/profession’; in other words, they gave witness to the fact they were strangers by a consistent way of life.

At our baptism we renounced our citizenship of the country we were born in or that we lived in, choosing rather to be citizens of the Kingdom that is to come. It is precisely because we claim

not to be citizens of an earthly kingdom that we seek exemption as conscientious objectors. We may be subjects, that is, people who live by certain laws, and accept the governance of those set over the nation, but that only applies in so far as it does not contradict or contravene the law of God. There may well come a time when we have to decide, as the apostles did, whether we can obey the strictures of those in authority and their laws or whether we have to go against such and serve God.

We cannot serve two masters

The Scriptures remind us very clearly that we cannot have divided loyalties, as Elijah said to Israel: “How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him” (1 Kgs. 18:21). Jesus said: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Mt. 22:21). He is reminding us of the image we bear and to Whom our loyalty is due.

When we rise from the waters of baptism to a new life in Christ we are committing ourselves to a lifelong service to God and to Christ. Our conscience must be exercised in every matter we are involved in as to whether it will compromise our beliefs and those of our brothers and sisters. The words of Jesus are very stark: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24). Yet so often we try to prove him wrong, an indication perhaps that we do not really believe him.

The Apostle Paul instructed the brethren and sisters at Corinth, “become not bondservants of men” (1 Cor. 7:23, RV). At the time of writing, slavery was still a fact of life (some estimate that two thirds of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves), and to be a free man was a great privilege that could only be obtained by birth or at a great price (Acts 16:37,38; 22:27,28). A bondslave or servant was someone whose will, abilities and time were wholly at the disposal of the one who owned him. This is the meaning of the Greek word *doulos*, which is used in the New Testament in relation to a bondslave. The root meaning of this word is ‘to bind’, *deō*, clearly indicating that one who was a bondservant was tied totally to his master.

Though, in human terms, being in such a position is considered to be degrading, for those in Christ it is the highest calling. A bondservant

A matter of conscience: a personal questionnaire

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ” (1 Pet. 3:15,16). Are we prepared to give an answer of a good conscience? Think about the following ways in which your conscience may be at work already. How does your life compare with that described in 1 Peter 3?

- 1 Do you exercise your conscience in mundane matters, for example in ‘innocent’ social or out of work activities?
- 2 Do you witness for Christ when the opportunity arises, or do you hide your light under a bushel?
- 3 Are you honest in all aspects of your work or studies? Is your employment or chosen course of study consistent with being a conscientious objector? Do you think particularly of your use of your employer’s or academic establishment’s time, property, and good name?
- 4 Is your behaviour towards your employer or academic staff or neighbours or fellow employees/students without reproach or criticism?
- 5 Have you told your employer or neighbour already that you are a conscientious objector on religious grounds, or would it come as a shock to them?
- 6 If your work could even be remotely connected to a military task force, have you explained that you could not and would not be part of any civilian call-up if the organisation was conscripted or volunteered its services (and therefore its employees) to the military to secure a contract?
- 7 Would those you live and work amongst be taken by surprise by your position should a national emergency suddenly arise, or do you act as a conscientious objector each day anyway?
- 8 What sacrifices for your conscience sake have you already made in life?
- 9 Do you consciously restrict your enjoyment of the privileges of citizenship offered in the country you live in because you may one day have to refuse to accept certain conditions relating to that citizenship?
- 10 Are the comments we express regarding political events or social developments consistent with someone who is a stranger or alien in this present order?
- 11 Is our position as a conscientious objector affected by trade union membership or jury service?
- 12 Is watching films or reading material with a violent content consistent behaviour for someone who holds the beliefs of a conscientious objector?

could not serve two masters in the way they each would require. Paul therefore reminds the readers, “Ye were bought with a price; become not bondservants of men” (1 Cor. 7:23, RV). We have been bought by Christ, so we belong to him. We therefore must learn to subject our will and conscience to no one else save Christ, for we are in truth the possession of God Himself through Christ.

Summary

We ought to let all our attitudes, actions and words indicate to all we work and socialise with that we belong to Christ, and that his teaching and example motivate both our life and our lifestyle. We have the example of Christ, our captain, against whom there could be found no accusation. His is the example we must strive to follow. How do we measure up to this?