

THE RESTORATION OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

Ron Madson

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and . . . nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. —Isaiah 2:4

In 298 CE, Marcellus, a Roman centurion, was converted to Christ while serving with his unit in Northern Africa. A respite from conflict was taken to celebrate the pagan Roman emperor's birthday and pledge allegiance to the empire. Marcellus rose before the banqueters, cast off his military insignia, and cried out: "I serve Jesus Christ the eternal King. I will no longer serve your emperors." Marcellus was immediately arrested for breach of discipline. At his trial, he declared that "it is not right for a Christian man, who serves the Lord Christ, to serve in the armies of the world." He was immediately beheaded. According to the testimonies of those present, he died in great peace of mind, asking God to bless the judge that condemned him.¹

In the first three centuries of Christianity, the martyrdom of Marcellus was not an isolated act of faith—like tens of thousands of early Christians, he was following the example of those first apostles and disciples who observed intimately the words and example of Jesus of Nazareth.

1. Monks of Ramsgate, "Marcellus," in *Book of Saints* (1921), available on *CatholicSaints.Info*, Nov. 19, 2014, <https://catholicsaints.info/book-of-saints-marcellus-30-october>; and "Saint Marcellus: Military Martyr," *In Communion* (blog), Oct. 27, 2007, <https://incommunion.org/2007/10/saint-marcellus-military-martyr>.

Two millennia later, there are few Christian faiths that advocate conscientious objection to military conscription of their nation. Nearly all major Christian religions and churches have chosen another path, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is one of them. Its position is articulated on the Church's website: "Latter-day Saints in the military do not need to feel torn between their country and their God. In the Church, 'we believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law' (Articles of Faith 1:12). Military service shows dedication to this principle. . . . [I]f they [Latter-day Saints in the military] are required to shed another's blood [in war], their action will not be counted as a sin."²

Is this policy compatible with the words and life of Jesus, which he invited us to follow? Ultimately, the answers to these questions are a matter of conscience. But if our belief in Christ demands more than obedience to secular "kings, presidents, [and] rulers," there is another way available to all LDS members: conscientious objection.

A World of Perpetual Violence

After a lifetime of research, historian Will Durant observed: "War is one of the constants of history, and has not diminished with civilization or democracy. In the last 3,421 years of recorded history only 268 have seen no war."³ All eleven volumes in Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story of Civilization*, the last volume of which ends appropriately with Napoleon at Waterloo, meticulously chronicle perpetual violence among all humankind, with very rare exceptions, as each warring faction engages in mimetic "justified" violence upon those not of their tribe or nation.

Israel was no exception to never-ending violence. Entering the promised land with sword in hand, Joshua and his people killed every

2. "War," Gospel Topics, <https://www.lds.org/topics/war?lang=eng>.

3. Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 81.

newborn, infant, toddler, child, young man, and young woman; they killed fathers, mothers, the infirm, crippled, handicapped, disabled, and elderly in the city; they “left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed” (Joshua 10:40). The only people spared were those in the brothel who helped their spies. Israel’s founding historical narrative created a warrior God who sanctioned all sorts of genocide, brutality, and even torture of one’s enemies.

Every four years in Gospel Doctrine class, we dance around the horrors of the Old Testament as we either ignore or justify the unrelenting violence of kings and “prophets.” Israel’s King David is hailed a hero and favored of the Lord even after cutting off the genitals of two hundred Philistine men as a wedding gift to his father-in-law, Saul, and placing captive Moabites in three lines, cutting off the heads of every two lines while sparing one. Only when he commits adultery and schemes to murder Uriah is he considered fallen. Why? Because all manner of violence, torture, and even genocide is approved by their god when dealing with other tribes; only when they harm someone in their own tribe is it considered a sin. Even the prophet Samuel commands genocide: “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Samuel 15:3). Then when Saul shows mercy to King Agag after the slaughter, Samuel hacks the captive king up into little pieces.

Whether these Old Testament historical accounts written centuries later were fictional or not can be debated by scholars, but what is not debatable is Israel’s willingness to take God’s name in vain to justify all sorts of atrocities. Their warrior God fashioned in the imagination of both secular and spiritual leaders was challenged by voices arising from the wilderness warning of “prophets that teacheth lies . . . leaders of the people [who] lead them to err” (Isaiah 9:15–16), “prophets prophesying falsely” (Jeremiah 5:31), and “priests ruled by their own authority” (Zephaniah 3:4). These oracles prophesied of a Messiah who would

come not in worldly power but descend below all: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. . . . He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:3, 7).

A New Way

In the midst of perpetual violence, holy men heard the voice of God and spoke of a Messiah who would come. They taught that when he came in the flesh, “the things which he shall say unto you shall ye observe to do” (2 Nephi 32:5).

Jesus came into mortality to show what he and my father are *really like* and how the kingdom of God can be on the earth: “Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you” (Matthew 5:38–39; Luke 6:27–28); “resist not evil” (Matthew 5:39); “Put your sword back in its place . . . for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52); and “blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9).

His life was the message. Refusing the zealot option and prophesying of its futility, Jesus’ very entrance into Jerusalem from the eastern gate on a donkey exemplified a new kingdom in juxtaposition to the imperial procession of Pontius Pilate from the west gate holding the keys to the political and financial power of the Pax Romana buttressed by its war chariots.⁴

Even in his last breath Jesus showed us the way as he blessed and forgave his enemies. He demonstrated that a child of God refuses to engage in any form of retributive violence. He then invited us to “come follow him” even unto the cross.

The words and example of Christ left such an indelible imprint on his disciples that for three centuries the early Christians were known for their rejection of all forms of violence. Specifically, they renounced

4. J. Madson, “Holy Week,” *The Mormon Worker* (blog), Apr. 7, 2009, <https://themormonworker.wordpress.com/2009/04/07/holy-week>.

all forms of state-sponsored militarism, and there are scant records of any Christians serving in any nation's army.

While scholars have debated the degree to which the early Christians practiced pure pacifism, there is no doubt that the early church fathers interpreted the words and example of Christ to support the following church policies:

For from Jerusalem there went out into the world, men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking; but by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the word of God; and we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also . . . willingly die confessing Christ.⁵ A believer who seeks to become a soldier, he must be rejected, for he has despised God.⁶ But how will a Christian man war, nay how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? The Lord in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier.⁷ We do not arm ourselves against any nation. We do not learn the art of war because, through Jesus Christ, we have become the children of peace.⁸

For the first Christians, Jesus was the center of their allegiance and the empire was at its margins. Christians became an affront to the empires of this world when they, by taking upon themselves the full and literal weight of the cross even unto death, channeled an unearthly power that would draw millions to their message.

5. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 39:1–3 (155–57 CE), available at <http://early-christianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>.

6. John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, eds., *Readings in World Christian History*, vol. 1, *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2013), 22.

7. C. John Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (London: Headley, 1919), 55, citing Tertullian's *De Idololatria* (198–203 CE).

8. Origen of Alexandria, *Contra Celsum*, book 5, chap. 33, available at *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04165.htm>.

The Constantine Shift

In 312 CE, civil war was raging in Rome, with Constantine and Maxentius both making claims to be the next emperor of Rome. Being considerably outnumbered, Constantine had a dream wherein he was told to “mark the heavenly sign of God on the shields of the soldiers. . . . [B]y means of a slanted letter X with the top of its head bent round, he marked Christ on their shields.”⁹ Then the next night he dreamed he saw Christ appear with the same heavenly sign. Constantine then defeated Maxentius and became the next emperor of Rome. One year later, Constantine issued an edict for toleration of Christian believers, and finally Christianity was able to come out of the shadows and merge with the power structures of Rome. In just one generation during the reign of Emperor Constantine, Christianity was seduced by the desire to be accepted by the Roman Empire to the point that they rapidly began to find the necessary rationales to merge their beliefs with the objectives of the state. The shift was so complete that, “In 416 [CE] an order was decreed with the result that pagans were not admitted to the army. All the soldiers had become Christians; or, in other words, all the Christians had, with few exceptions, denied Christ.”¹⁰ Where Christians had placed their allegiance to Christ above all earthly powers, now with the Constantine shift complete, Christians pledged their allegiance to their host nation so that now they believed it was their duty to support and justify the wars of the Roman Empire.

It was only a matter of time until the legal inheritors of Saint Peter’s chief seat issued edicts that it was the duty of Christians to fight when called upon by their nation to free the “holy” lands from the heathen Muslims, and those who did so were not only absolved from sin but told

9. Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.4–6, in *Lactantius: De Mortibus Persecutorum*, edited and translated by J. L. Creed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), quoted in Noel Lenski, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 71.

10. Leo Tolstoy, *The Law of Love and The Law of Violence* (New York: Dover, 2010), 63.

that their sacrifice would be honored. In 1095 CE, Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont inspired the First Crusade by issuing what came to be known as the “war indulgence”: “All who die in battle against the pagan shall have immediate remission of sins. This I grant through the power of God with which I am invested.”¹¹

Through the dark centuries that followed, papal endorsement of state-sponsored wars was supported by church apologists who articulated various “just war” doctrines. However, in stark contrast, there were those resilient faiths and orders, such as the Anabaptists and their progeny, who have continued to this day to renounce all forms of violence.

Christ’s Covenant of Peace with a New People

In this dispensation, the Lord chose to mediate through a young prophet, Joseph Smith, a vision of what his kingdom was once and now could be. Gathering in Missouri, persecutions began as the Saints were driven from their homes with threats of continued violence. Remarkably, there was little resistance on the part of the Saints: “Here let me remark, that up to this time the Mormons had not so much as lifted a finger, even in their own defence [*sic*], so tenacious were they for the precepts of the gospel—‘turn the other cheek.’”¹²

In the throes of these persecutions, on August 6, 1833, Joseph Smith received a revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants section 98. This revelation is not a mere collection of peace platitudes but rather concise, almost statutory, instructions from the Lord cloaked in covenantal language that cannot be misunderstood. In this revelation, the Lord commands his people to “renounce war.” He commands them to not retaliate against their enemies when harmed or attacked but to

11. The “Liber Lamberti,” a source based on the notes of Bishop Lambert of Arras who attended the Council, indicates that Urban offered the remission of all penance due from sins, what later came to be called a war indulgence.

12. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 1:391.

immediately “raise a standard of peace.” The Saints are commanded to endure two additional attacks without responding in kind. Then, if a fourth attack occurs, the Saints are “justified” in responding in kind, but the Lord then makes it perfectly clear that like “unto mine ancients” we are commanded that we “should not go out unto battle against any nation, kindred, tongue, or people, save I, the Lord, commanded them” (D&C 98:33). This law is consistent with Mormon’s final warning: “Know ye not that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood, and take them not again, save it be that God shall command you” (Mormon 7:4).

Missouri War of 1838: Why We Lost Zion

From July through the late fall of 1833, the Saints were chased out of Jackson County, Missouri and relocated in the northern counties of Missouri. Because they did not retaliate to threats and actual violence, but instead left Jackson County peacefully, they were seen for the most part as victims of unjust persecution and were welcomed by the citizens and leaders of these northern counties. Public opinion was turning in their favor.¹³ Their patience was being rewarded, but would their resolve endure?

After nearly five years of relative peace, there arose competition for land rights in the northwest Missouri counties tied to the upcoming fall elections in 1838. Old fears and prejudices began to arise. Past grievances were publicly declared by Church leadership, and the desire for retribution was fueled by hyperbolic rhetoric that coalesced in the formation of the Mormon Danites. This environment of fear and anger was further spurred on by the now infamous salt sermon given by Sidney Rigdon on

13. A number of Clay County leaders, including David Atchison, Alexander Doniphan, and Judge Cameron, sympathized with the Mormons, whom they believed had been unjustly persecuted. And as recorded in the *Elders' Journal*, “the Saints here are at perfect peace with all the surrounding inhabitants,” and many Missourians reached out to assist their Mormon neighbors with goods, land, and employment. See Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 18–24.

June 17, 1838.¹⁴ Shortly thereafter, Rigdon gave an address now called the Fourth of July speech in which he conjoined religious zeal with patriotic language to justify “exterminating” all that opposed their establishment of Zion.¹⁵ The contagion grew from some to many, including key leaders of the Church who began endorsing vengeance. Certain members—notably John Corrill, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Thomas Marsh—dissented to the rising tide of voices demanding complete allegiance to Church leadership, including the call to exterminate anyone who opposed them, Mormon and non-Mormon alike.

With reports of injustices done to certain Mormon settlements, the newly-formed Mormon army moved from words to actions when in mid-October they chose to make preemptive attacks against the Daviess County towns of Gallatin, Grindstone Fork, Splawn’s Ridge, and Milport—chasing out the non-Mormons, looting and stealing their belongings, taking it to the bishops’ storehouse, and then burning their homes. This went on for at least two weeks in Daviess County. Most of the Mormon militia relished¹⁶ in it, though some were sickened.¹⁷ But the pillaging in Daviess County was not enough

14. Part of Sidney Rigdon’s salt sermon reads, “And that mob that comes on to disturb us, it shall be between us and them a war of extermination, for we will follow them, till the last drop of blood is spilled . . . for we will carry the seat of war to their own houses, and their own families, and one party of the other shall be utterly destroyed.”

15. See F. Mark McKiernan, “Sidney Rigdon’s Missouri Speeches,” *BYU Studies* 11, no. 1 (1971): 1–3.

16. On the one hand, John Corrill wrote, “It appeared to me also that the love of pillage grew upon them very fast” (*A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* [St. Louis: N.P., 1839], 38). On the other hand, future apostle Lyman Wight informed his men that they must pray that “God would damn them [Missourians] and give us power to kill them” (Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life’s Review* [Independence, Mo.: Zion’s Printing and Publishing Co., 1947], available at Joseph Smith Foundation, <https://josephsmithfoundation.org/autobiography-of-benjamin-f-johnson-1818-1905>).

17. “I might say there was almost a trial of my faith in my pity for our enemies, even those who were plotting our destruction. . . . While others were doing the

for the Mormon militia seeking to “defend” themselves. Led by apostle David Patten, they targeted a state militia under the command of Captain Bogart that was encamped at Crooked River on the border between Caldwell and Ray County to the south. The Mormon army considered this state militia a mob, while the militia saw themselves as the protectors of Ray County from the Mormon army that had already invaded Daviess County. Shouting “God and country,” the Mormon militia attacked Bogart’s company. One in Bogart’s militia was killed, and another mutilated as he lay wounded and defenseless on the ground. Bogart’s Crooked River militia fled in terror. Upon hearing of these attacks, general public opinion in Missouri swung abruptly against the Mormons. Governor Boggs ordered all available state militia in defense of the surrounding towns and counties, then issued his infamous extermination order in imitation of Sidney Rigdon’s previously-issued extermination threat. The conflict was now full-blown as hundreds who had previously supported the Mormons were volunteering to defend themselves from what they now saw as a Mormon insurrection.¹⁸ Previously cooperative Generals Doniphan and Atchison no longer made any attempt to contact the Mormon leaders as they prepared for war. Mirroring the Mormon militia’s logic of preemptive war, and further based on hysteria-induced testimony that the Mormons at Haun’s Mill were planning an invasion, a mob decided that they were justified in attacking the Mormons at Haun’s Mill. Legislator Charles Ashby, a participant in that slaughter, told the

burning and plunder, my mission was of mercy” (Johnson, *My Life’s Review*).

18. “I did not first approve of the vigilantes, but I finally believed they were right and I joined with them. I am convinced that history does not afford a deeper laid scheme of villainy than that which has just developed itself in regard to the course pursued by that sect” (Arthur Bradford to Major Bradford, Nov. 13, 1838, as quoted in LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri*, 146).

Missouri legislature: “We thought it best to attack them first. What we did was in our own self-defense, and we had a right to do it.”¹⁹

Reacting to Mormon aggressions, Governor Boggs marshaled the state militias who came in overwhelming force to Far West, where most of the Mormons were preparing for what they described as a final grand conflict where the power of the Lord would be manifest as they subdued their enemies. However, seeing the futility of resistance, Joseph and the Mormon militia were persuaded to surrender, have their arms confiscated, and enter into an agreement that the Mormons would commence leaving Missouri altogether. Zion was lost, and the Saints did not prevail against their “enemies.”

During this entire conflict, remarkably very little if any reference was made by Church leaders to the Lord’s “immutable” covenant found in Doctrine and Covenants section 98 (published in 1835) during the build-up, promotion, and final decision to attack these non-Mormon settlements. It was as if the scripture never existed. Those who actually renounced this war and made a plea for peace were silenced, threatened, and, in some cases, cut off from the Church. Two apostles, Thomas Marsh and Orson Hyde, swore out affidavits condemning what they considered acts of aggression by the Mormons. Lorenzo Snow thought Marsh was guilty of supporting the enemy: “He [Marsh] expresses unbounded charity for our enemies—said he did not think they intended us much harm—they were not naturally inclined to wickedness.”²⁰ For this, Thomas Marsh was threatened, causing him and his and his family to flee for safety. He was then excommunicated in absentia.

Edward Partridge, John Corrill, Thomas Marsh, and several others got it right from the beginning during the first conflict that our religious community was confronted with in 1838. They refused to retaliate against

19. Daniel Ashby, quoted in “Letter from the Editor,” *Missouri Republican Daily*, Dec. 24, 1838, 2.

20. As quoted in Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1884), 31.

their “enemies” even if it cost, for some of them, being marginalized or cast out of their faith community. Other Saints took longer to reach such clarity—most never did. One Mormon militia member, Ebenezer Robinson, sought to tutor us from a lesson he and others learned through tribulation:

Within the short space of four months from the time the church made that threatening boast that if a mob should come upon us again, ‘we would carry the war to their own houses, and one party or the other should be utterly destroyed,’ we found ourselves prisoners of war, our property confiscated, our leaders in close confinement, and the entire church required to leave the state or be exterminated. We admonish all [C]hristian people to let this be a solemn warning to never suffer themselves to make a threatening boast of what they would do under certain circumstances, as we are not our own keepers, and we feel certain the Lord will not help us fight any such battles.²¹

The non-Mormons persecuted the Saints in 1833 and then, even after receiving this “immutable” covenant with a promise of peace, the Saints chose to ignore the words of the Lord and took matters into their own hands five years later. As God’s covenant people, we do not lose Zion because the power of the devil is greater than the Lord’s power, but we always forfeit Zion when we reject the words of the Lord. The Saints were exiled, and Joseph, with a few others, was sent to Liberty Jail. But the Lord was merciful to Joseph Smith—as he is to all of us—by continuing to speak to him in his deepest despair. There in Liberty Jail, Joseph received further tutoring as to what constituted the proper exercise of the priesthood in the incomparable section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants—not just with those in the covenant but with all of God’s children.

21. “Items of Personal History of the Editor,” *The Return* 2, no. 2, Feb. 14, 1890, 210, available at <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/RigWrit/M&A/Return1.htm#14-9002a>.

To What Extent Have We Renounced War Since 1838?

In 1890, the Church abandoned polygamy, and then six years later Utah obtained statehood. Prior to that we had practiced “selective pacifism” in that we retained the right to participate or not in any given conflict. However, two years after statehood, “the elimination of selective pacifism was abandoned following an internal conflict in the church over the participation in the Spanish-American War.”²² Consequently, the Spanish-American War of 1898 was the first major conflict in which large numbers of Mormons served in the US military:

For many Americans the first serious test of Mormon “patriotism” occurred with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. Although a few Mormons, notably Brigham Young, Jr. spoke out against the war, most Latter-day Saints, like other Americans, gave it their enthusiastic support. With official encouragement from church leaders, several hundred young Mormons enlisted. There were cheers and waving of flags as the young men marched through the streets of Salt Lake City before boarding the train that would take them to their destination. . . . Although it may not have been precisely the war they would have preferred, Mormons responded with general enthusiasm to an opportunity to demonstrate their national loyalty.²³

This patriotic fervor carried over into World War I as twenty-four thousand LDS served, and many more in World War II. “The Saints had become Americans ‘lock, stock, and barrel.’”²⁴ Nevertheless, the issue of whether Mormons should or should not be considered conscientious objectors continued to be debated as many Latter-day Saints declared

22. D. Michael Quinn, “The Mormon Church and the Spanish-American War: An End to Selective Pacifism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 4 (1984): 11–16.

23. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 251.

24. Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 252.

conscientious objector status during WWI.²⁵ At the conclusion of those two great and terrible conflicts, the United States called to establish compulsory and universal military training as well as to create a standing army for the nation's protection. Observing the crushing spiritual harm done to young men participating in the horrors of war as well as the deleterious spiritual effects of being trained to kill, the First Presidency issued a letter dissenting from such a policy, outlining seventeen reasons why members of the faith should avoid enlisting in the military.²⁶

The proclamation of 1947 was ignored twenty years later during the Vietnam conflict and replaced with this policy: "We make no statement on how this country can or should try to disengage itself from the present regrettable war in Vietnam; that is a problem . . . which must be solved by our governmental officials in whom we have complete confidence. We believe our young men should hold themselves in readiness to respond to the call of their government to serve in the armed forces when called upon. . . . [W]e believe in honoring, sustaining, and upholding the law."²⁷

Before Vietnam, very little was said by Church leaders in regard to one seeking conscientious objector status. However, as the truth of the causes and prosecution of this war was uncovered—such as when the Pentagon Papers were dramatically released—there was an increasing consciousness of the realities of the immorality of our nation's involvement in this conflict and the deliberate deceit involved in creating public support to enter this war. There was a growing minority of Latter-day Saints who joined in protesting our occupation of Vietnam as an unjust and even immoral war effort. Consequently, a letter was circulated by the office of the First Presidency stating that while membership alone

25. George W. Givens, *500 More Little-Known Facts in Mormon History* (Springville, Utah: Bonneville Books, 2004), 229.

26. James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 6:239–42.

27. "First Presidency Takes a Stand on Vietnam War," *Deseret News*, May 24, 1969, 12.

did not make one a conscientious objector, individual members could avail themselves of the exemption provided by law: “[M]embership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not make one a conscientious objector. . . . As the brethren understand, the existing law provides that men who have conscientious objection may be excused from combat service. There would seem to be no objection, therefore, to a man availing himself on a personal basis of the exemptions provided by law.”²⁸

Revelations during and subsequent to the Vietnam War had a sobering effect on our nation for those who saw the deceit leading us into war, and then the abhorrent evil and futility associated with that war. Parallel to the First Presidency statement just months after the end of World War II, where they renounced the creation of a compulsory draft and the buildup of a standing army, the prophetic voice of President Spencer W. Kimball invited us to trust in the Lord rather than the arm of flesh:

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan’s counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior’s teaching: “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” (Matthew 5:44). . . . We must leave off the worship of modern-day idols and a reliance on the “arm of flesh,” for the Lord has said to all the world in our day, “I will not spare any that remain in Babylon” (D&C 64:24).²⁹

28. Letter to Eugene England signed by Joseph Anderson, Secretary to the First Presidency, reprinted in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1968): 8.

29. Spencer W. Kimball, “The False Gods We Worship,” *Ensign*, Jun. 1976.

This statement by President Kimball approaches what “renouncing war” sounds like but without specificity (e.g., “We renounce the United States’ intervention in the Vietnam War”) or prophetic timeliness; it would have been more powerful to issue this statement at the time of the event rather than a year after the conflict ended and the loss was irretrievably complete for millions. With each passing year and the release of information through the Freedom of Information Act (an oxymoron given that we have to wait twenty-five years after the fact), the unrelenting protests by both Christian and secular voices during the Vietnam conflict and the statement by President Kimball in 1976 have been vindicated in that our reliance on the “arm of the flesh” has been proven to be not only futile but has placed us in a position of contributing to unjustified and immoral warfare.

9/11: A Failed Chance to Get it Right

In the decade leading up to 2001, the United States military dropped hundreds of bombs on civilian populations in the Middle East only to see those people increase in their hatred and desire for retribution, culminating in the horrific 9/11 attacks. How would we as a nation respond and, in particular, how would we as Latter-day Saints react? What doctrine and deeply-held beliefs would govern us?

We know how the US government responded. On September 15, 2001, Congress approved a resolution authorizing President Bush to use “all necessary and appropriate force” against anyone associated with the terrorist attacks of September 11. The measure passed 98–0 in the Senate and 420–1 in the House. This broad resolution to use force against anyone associated—or believed to be associated—with these attacks became known as the Bush Doctrine, which authorized the initiation

of preemptive war: “the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively in exercising our inherent right to self-defense.”³⁰

If ever there was a war that had crossed over every doctrinal and ethical line of our Latter-day Saint religious belief, it was the United States’ invasion into Afghanistan and Iraq. The Book of Mormon could not be clearer that the very moment we begin to take the war to our enemies and invade their lands, we have become the very evil we deplore—especially when we wage war against those who have never attacked us. As required by the Lord’s immutable covenant of peace found in section 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

- Did we as a faith specifically “renounce” the invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq?
- Did we renounce those voices that called for vengeance and promised retribution?
- Did we accept either Afghanistan’s or Iraq’s own standard of peace when they claimed that they had not attacked us nor would they ever attack us in the future?
- Did we accept their “prayer for peace” and forgive them “seventy times seven” (D&C 98:40)?
- Did we consider living a higher law and not seeking retribution?

Was revelation sought for and obtained before choosing to invade these countries?

30. The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, Sept. 17, 2002, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>. The full paragraph reads: “To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively in exercising our inherent right of self-defense. The United States will not resort to force in all cases to preempt emerging threats. And no country should ever use preemption as a pretext for aggression.” This author might add that what the Bush Doctrine was trying to tell us was that no country should use preemption as a pretext for aggression other than the United States.

Just after the United States and its allied forces invaded Afghanistan and were making a case to invade Iraq, then apostle Russell M. Nelson in the October general conference taught that section 98 requires us to “renounce war and proclaim peace.”³¹ Picking up on this address, CNN reported that the LDS Church had issued a strong anti-war message regarding “current hostilities”—Afghanistan and the proposed invasion of Iraq.³² The Church’s public relations department immediately responded that the talk had been misinterpreted as being applicable to “current hostilities” and that “the Church itself, as such, has no responsibility for these policies, other than urging its members fully to render loyalty to their country.”³³

The following spring and just days after our invasion of Iraq, President Gordon B. Hinckley addressed war and peace issues: “Modern revelation states that we are to ‘renounce war and proclaim peace.’”³⁴ However, unlike Elder Nelson’s address, President Hinckley’s statements could not have been misinterpreted as an anti-war message regarding

31. Russell M. Nelson, “Blessed Are the Peacemakers,” Oct. 2002, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2002/10/blessed-are-the-peacemakers?lang=eng>.

32. As the Associated Press reported: “The Mormon Church issued a strong anti-war message at its semiannual General Conference, clearly referring to current hostilities in the Middle East, advocating patience and negotiations, and urging the faithful to be peacemakers.” Also included in the report was this characterization of Nelson’s remarks: “The Golden Rule’s prohibition of one interfering with the rights of others was equally binding on nations and associations and left no room for retaliatory reactions, Nelson said at the meeting Saturday” (“Mormon Church Takes Anti-War Stance,” *World-Wide Religious News*, Oct. 6, 2002, <https://wwrn.org/articles/5993>).

33. “Message of Peace Misinterpreted,” *Mormon Newsroom*, Oct. 7, 2002, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/message-of-peace-misinterpreted>. Note that the page is still available but the statement is no longer published there.

34. Gordon B. Hinckley, “War and Peace,” Apr. 2003, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2003/04/war-and-peace?lang=eng>.

“current hostilities.”³⁵ Rather, he made several non-qualified statements regarding how everyone is “under the direction of our respective national leaders” and “subject to the laws of our government,” especially soldiers: “Those in the armed services are under obligation to their respective governments to execute the will of the sovereign. When they joined the military, they entered into a contract by which they are presently bound and to which they have dutifully responded.”³⁶

President Hinckley’s reliance on political leaders’ judgment was not only based on national allegiance, but also on his belief that “[t]hey have access to greater political and military intelligence than do the people generally.”³⁷ He then shared his “personal feelings” and “dictates” of his “personal loyalties” in the present situation, which rested on the belief that the invasion of these countries was analogous to the Nephites’ defending their families and their liberty. And finally, similar to papal decrees during the Crusades, he offered a latter-day war indulgence: “God will not hold men and women in uniform responsible as agents of their government in carrying forward that which they are legally obligated to do. It may even be that He will hold us responsible if we try to impede or hedge up the way of those who are involved in a contest with forces of evil and repression.”³⁸

Despite then Elder Nelson’s timely address and the principles outlined in section 98, the words and example of Jesus were then and continue

35. Renouncing war demands that we go further than simply stating that war is not nice. Rather, it is declaring a resolute “No!” as to a particular war. As Hugh Nibley put it: “‘Renounce’ is a strong word: we are not to try to win peace by war, or merely to call a truce, but to renounce war itself, to disclaim it as a policy while proclaiming . . . peace without reservation” (“Renounce War,” Letter to the Editor, *Daily Universe*, Mar. 26, 1971, available at <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1094&index=11>).

36. Hinckley, “War and Peace.”

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

to be marginalized, if not wholly ignored, in favor of being “under the direction of our national leaders.” Just as we did in 1838 in Missouri, the voices of dissent to preemptive strikes in these contemporary wars were condemned as not being patriotic, reports of grievances were once again exaggerated or fabricated, and in the end, many innocent have perished and will perish on both sides of the conflict as we pursue these wars of aggression. Nothing has changed other than sealing our condemnation for treating lightly the words of Christ “to do according to that which I [the Lord] have written” (D&C 84:54–58). We have adopted our own Constantinian shift.

Conscientious Objection

The United States Department of Defense sets forth the criteria for classification as a conscientious objector. They declare that conscientious objector status may be approved for any individual:

- a. Who is conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form.
- b. Whose opposition is based on a moral, ethical, or religious belief.
- c. Whose position is firm, fixed, sincere, and deeply held.³⁹

They further clarify that “[a] Service member’s objection may be founded on religious training or belief; it may also be based on personal beliefs that are purely moral or ethical in source or content and occupy to the Service member a place parallel to that filled by more traditional religious convictions.”⁴⁰

How are we perceived as a faith community and culture when it comes to religious training or belief? Are we known as taking upon us the name of Christ and being one with him? If so, in what ways? When one thinks about the Amish, Quaker, or Mennonite communities, one

39. DoD Instruction 1300.06, “Conscientious Objectors,” section 3.1, Jul. 12, 2017, 4, available for download at <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=802711>.

40. *Ibid.*, 5.

associates these faiths with non-violent pacifism. What about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? One typically thinks of strict dietary laws, family values, service, and clean living. But those virtues can be found in many cultures and organizations, both religious and secular. As Latter-day “Saints,” the voices of saints of the past are calling us to be much more. We have the words of Christ in all our sacred texts inviting us to renounce all wars and follow his example. If the words and example of Christ in our sacred texts are not enough to convince us to renounce all wars, or if we have found a rationalization to “justify” rejecting the call to renounce all wars, then nothing changes. But if we have a desire to do so, then how do we “renounce” all wars and communicate that message to family, friends, community, and the world? I would argue we could do so by individually and as a faith community qualifying for conscientious objector status as part of our religious belief, training, and policy—not just for now but for our children, grandchildren, and our posterity to come.

While adopting a conscientious objection to all wars as part of our religious training and belief may be considered extreme or even impractical, I believe that once it is understood what conscientious objection requires—and, equally importantly, what it does not require—we will find that do so is not only practical, but perfectly consistent with the religious training and belief that have always been a necessary part of the full restoration of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. An individual and faith community can maintain a conscientious objector status while reserving the right to defend oneself, family, community, and even one’s nation from direct and immediate personal harm

Conscientious objection is not pure pacifism, as was practiced by the first Christians and some Christian faiths today. One can obtain conscientious objector status while still maintaining the belief and practice of reserving the right to use force in cases of direct physical threats to self, family, community, or nation. In the seminal conscientious objection case of *Gillette v. United States*, the US Supreme Court so clarified: “A

further word may be said to clarify our statutory holding. Apart from abstract theological reservations, two other sorts of reservations concerning use of force have been thought by lower courts not to defeat a conscientious objector claim. Willingness to use force in self-defense, in defense of home and family, or in defense against immediate acts of aggressive violence toward other persons in the community, has not been regarded as inconsistent with a claim of conscientious objection to war as such.”⁴¹

Conscientious objection allows a theocratic exception, i.e., a person and faith community can choose to participate in a war where they claim to have received a direct personal revelation from God to do so while still maintaining conscientious objector status as to any future conflicts or wars.

Furthermore, while the religious training and belief of a faith community requires one have an objection to “war in any form,” meaning all wars, again the United States Supreme Court in *Sicurella v. United States* ruled that those who obtained conscientious objection to participation in all “secular” wars in general based on their religious training could believe and in fact participate in a “theocratic war” if so commanded to them by their god.⁴²

As set forth in these Supreme Court decisions, the current conscientious objector status based on “religious training or belief” in the United States is perfectly aligned with the unmistakable message of the Book of Mormon that no war should be engaged in unless it involves actual self-defense of one’s family and community *and* revelation from God to engage in the same (Mormon 7:3–4) and the Lord’s repeated admonitions throughout the Doctrine and Covenants and in particular his “immutable covenant” of peace given in section 98 of the Doctrine

41. *Gillette v. United States*, 401 U.S. 437 (1971), 447–48, available at <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/401/437>.

42. *Sicurella v. United States*, 348 U.S. 385 (1955).

and Covenants.⁴³ If the Church were to adopt a policy of conscientious objection to all wars then:

- We would send a message to the world that we “renounce war and proclaim peace” as it pertains to current conflicts where our dissent can make a real difference when it counts.
- We would reverse our current policy where we have a default position of having a duty to support our respective nations at time of war, right or wrong, to a default position of rejecting our nation’s invitation to any war as a matter of policy unless we receive revelation directly from the Lord to participate. By this reversal, we would be placing on our sovereign host nation the burden to demonstrate that any war it invites us to participate in is consistent with our beliefs and personal revelation before supporting any war, rather than our current policy that neither requires questioning nor revelation.
- We would be a voice and example of peace to our children and posterity that we are willing to literally take upon ourselves the words and example of Jesus by renouncing real wars and not just parroting empty platitudes that we “hate war and love peace” while finding a justification to march off to every war that comes along—only to find out over and over again that it was based on fraud and ended in untold unnecessary suffering.

During the Vietnam conflict, the draft boards recognized certain faiths as having well-established religious training or belief in rejecting conscription to wars, but the LDS Church was not one of them, nor is it now. This can and must change. Where do we begin? Currently, there is no draft in the US conscripting our young men into the military, but we can commence individually to give our voice to such religious training. It begins when we teach our children that discipleship invites us to renounce all wars and to take upon ourselves a full restoration of Jesus’ peace covenant.

43. Note: The scope of this essay does not include an analysis of the conscientious objection laws of any nation outside of the United States, but most nations provide for the same or similar protection for those whose religious training requires non-participation in the military or wars.

In my personal case, my father, who served in Patton's infantry during World War II, taught me that there is always another alternative to war if we really believe in and trust the Lord. This legacy of peace continues when my oldest son argues in his writings and lectures that all our sacred texts are inviting us to be like the Anti-Nephi-Lehies in their refusal to take arms against even their enemies and to reject all wars. It continues when my youngest son posts on social media that his heroes are Gandhi and Noble Peace Prize recipient Liu Xiaobo and writes a paper on Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* renouncing the folly of war. It continues when we decide to create a petition for members of our faith community to individually declare themselves conscientious objectors to all wars.⁴⁴ All these declarations and actions begin to build a new, or rather a restored, Christian faith that follows Jesus' example of renouncing all wars and uses of violence.

Renounce War Even When All Those around You Remain Silent

What difference will it make if we stand up and renounce a war that is popular not only among our fellow citizens but also our own faith community? Two stories during the Third Reich can be instructive. First, Helmuth Hübener, who as a young seventeen-year-old LDS German youth spoke out against Hitler and the Third Reich. He with two even younger LDS friends courageously distributed pamphlets warning about the evil being perpetuated by their own country during the rise of Nazism. For this, Helmuth was excommunicated by his local ward and tried and executed by the German government. In the end, he stood alone and joined the ranks of the Christian martyrs who, though

44. "Latter-Day Saints Renouncing War," declaration, <http://ldsrenouncewar.org>.

rejected by country and, in this case, even church, will be forever in our memories and in the final judgment vindicated.⁴⁵

The second story, which is less known, is even more instructive of what can happen when even small groups of people stand together. When all other voices in Germany, including the clergy at the highest levels, had become silent to the rise and brutality of the Third Reich and even pledged their duty to support their nation at war, in early 1943, hundreds of German women did the unthinkable—they confronted machine gun-wielding Gestapo agents and demanded the release of their Jewish husbands, who were part of Hitler's final roundup of Jews to be transported to Auschwitz. Even more remarkably, their Jewish husbands (approximately 1,700 in number) were released. This incident, now known as the Rosenstrasse protest, was appropriately dubbed "The Day Hitler Blinked."⁴⁶ This story has, until recently, been largely ignored by Germans because the consensus has been and remains that the average German was powerless against their government and its anti-Semitic policies. Such thinking appears to be confirmed, as a practical matter, when focusing on individual martyrs such as Helmuth Hübener and the occasional principled monk, priest, or clergyman who defied his government's policies of war, torture, and genocide. However, what set the Rosenstrasse act of civil disobedience apart from isolated protests is that these women collectively stood together, showing that even a small group standing on higher moral ground can cause even the most formidable powers to recoil. And if these fearless women could make a difference, think of what millions of united voices in a faith community could do.

45. Blair Holmes and Alan Frank Keele, *When Truth was Treason: German Youth Against Hitler: The Story of the Helmuth Hübener Group* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

46. Hilary Potter, *Remembering Rosenstrasse: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Germany* (Pieterlen, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2018).

There comes a time when each of us must decide if we are going to live to the full measure of our faith by renouncing all state-sponsored wars. To “renounce” is an active verb requiring us to do so publicly—no matter how few join with us. For some of us, that personal decision was made a long time ago whether others join in or whether it appears we made a difference or not. We are witnessing to an audience beyond this veil whose approbation means everything in the final spiritual equation.

What if the next time we are asked to send our sons, daughters, husbands, and wives to war, we exercise the same courage as the women in Rosenstrasse did by defiantly protesting? What if this time hundreds, even thousands, in our faith community, in moral outrage, say “no more of our sons, our daughters, our fathers, our mothers, our husbands, our wives will be placed on your war altars”? Could we as a faith community have an impact? Would we compel our national leaders to “blink”? Would our refusal to give the Mormon stamp of approval to the next promoted war cause some of our fellow citizens to join us in creating a wave of protest that might just prevent the next war, or at least pause the war momentum long enough to discover that there were, for example, no “weapons of mass destruction”—that we were being once again deceived into waging another war of aggression? Could we convince them to think long and hard before offering up any more of their own children to altars of Moloch? In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “there comes a time when silence is betrayal.”⁴⁷

It is not hard to imagine that after 9/11, with clear vision and trusting in the words of Christ, our pulpits could have been ringing with a clear message renouncing our invasion into Iraq. Think of the message that would have sent to this nation: that we really believe that vengeance thinly veiled as “justice” is what all Christians should renounce. And while withholding support, who knows but what our example would

47. Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” Apr. 4, 1967, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam>.

inspire other faiths to pause and place the burden on our government to prove the absolute necessity and morality for such a war.

The Lord prophesied about a future day of peace: “And it shall come to pass among the wicked, that every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor must needs flee unto Zion for safety. And there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven; and it shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another” (D&C 45:68–69). We can choose to obey the Lord’s covenant of peace and publicly renounce all wars so as to qualify individually and as a faith community as conscientious objectors as an integral part of our religious training and belief. I believe it will make all the difference in restoring the Lord’s kingdom on earth. The invitation to become as the city of Enoch has always been there. When will the Lord return? He comes again when we are ready to receive his kingdom within ourselves and trust in him alone and “learn war no more.”⁴⁸

48. From the anti-war song “The Vine and the Fig Tree,” based on Isaiah 2:4.