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Love Your Enemy? Reflections at the Centenary of World War I

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August 2014 marks the centenary of the beginning of World War I (1914-1918). This war ushered in a new period of warfare and entered the annals of history as one of the deadliest military conflicts this world has ever seen. New methods of killing as many people as possible were employed without hesitation.

One hundred years later most survivors of these terrible events and their disastrous results have already passed away. Nevertheless, for the next five years many countries will commemorate the war by facilitating exhibitions, organizing conferences, holding lectures, and broadcasting TV documentaries. Our world changed forever in those pivotal four years.

Interestingly, not every country commemorates the Great War in the same manner. Denmark, for example, celebrates the event as a big step toward modern Europe because the country remained neutral during the war. The British recall memories of the victory over Germany, and for Americans the entry into the war in 1917 marks the ascent of the United States as a superpower.

As we reflect about the negative and positive experiences of Seventh-day Adventists during World War I, we may become better citizens of both our native countries and the kingdom of heaven.

The Cruelty and Insanity of War

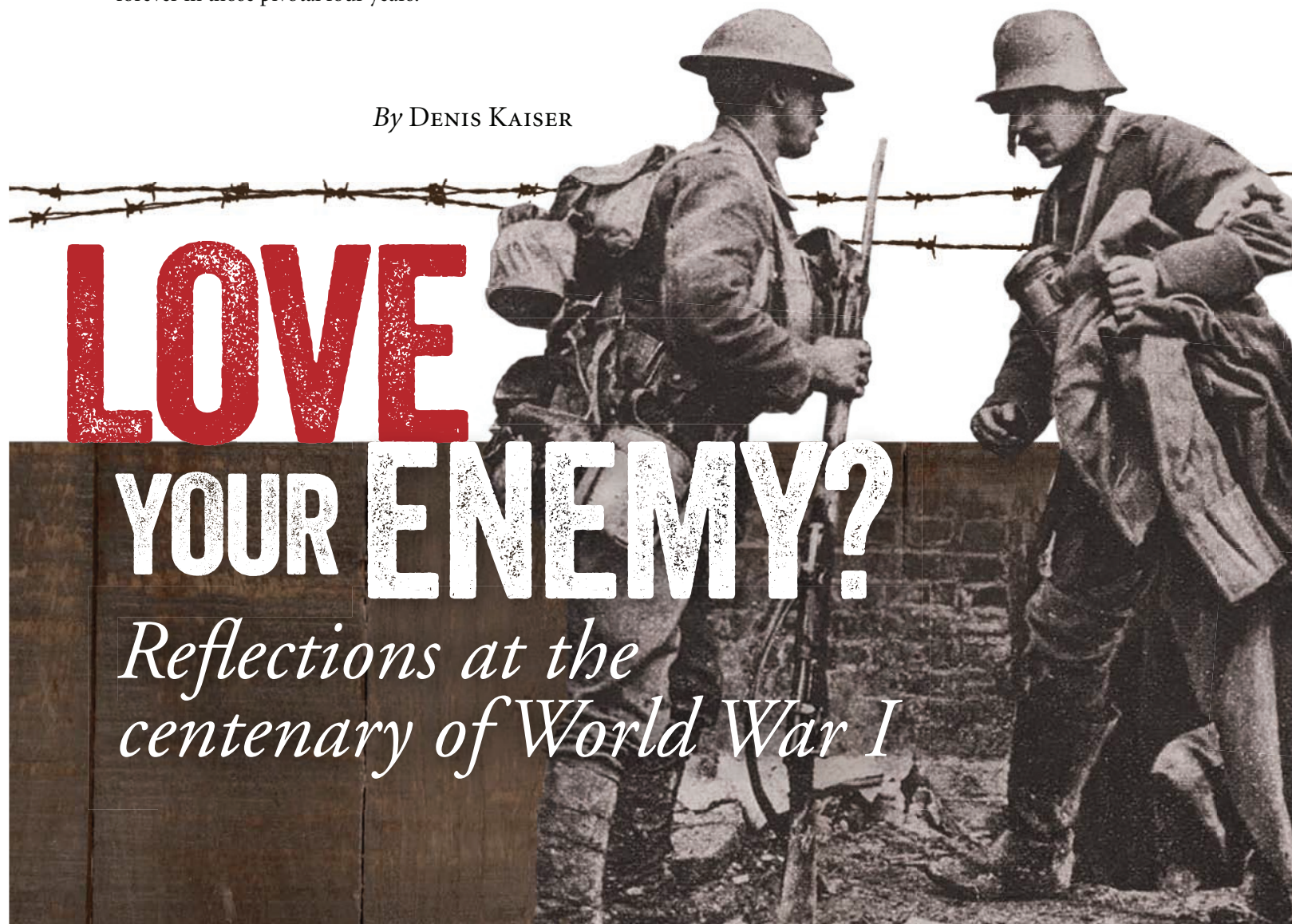
World War I dragged many, even devout Christians, into less-than-ideal circumstances that left them confused about what they were supposed to do. Of course, none of the involved countries really contemplated a global war. In fact, in the early 1900s diverse political and military alliances, as well as the arms race between the leading European countries, were intended to create a safer world.

When Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914, these circumstances unleashed, however, a quick succession of correlated war declarations between the nations of Europe. The warring parties employed

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state-of-the-art technology and methods of warfare—tanks, long-range missiles, bombs released from airplanes, booby traps, phosphorus projectiles, and poison gas. In the trench warfare between Germany and France, millions of regular soldiers lost their lives as their military leaders threw them as calculated “material” into pointless predetermined slaughter.¹ Seventeen million soldiers and civilians died as a result of military action, malnutrition, disease, famine, and accidents. Eight million soldiers went missing and nearly 21 million were wounded.

It is hard to believe that these same combatting countries were known for astounding contributions in music, literature, science, and theology. How could their politicians and military authorities relapse into the barbarism and rage of this type of war? One might interpose that Christians would never have planned and participated in the slaughter. However, many of the politicians, military leaders, and soldiers themselves were actually committed Christians. We can never fully know what that Christianity meant to them in the moment they became killers or victims. Even many of the victims were probably ready to kill others in order to escape their cruel fate.² The world’s deadliest feud to date revealed that religious forms, savvy, and diplomacy are not enough to save us from getting entangled in the insanity of war.

Yes to Defense but No to Attack

Even those who objected to the use of weapons and violence for religious and conscientious reasons found themselves in difficult circumstances. The majority of the warring parties

failed to provide exceptions for those objecting to the use of violence. Trying to avoid any direct participation in combat, Seventh-day Adventists were known as conscientious objectors since the American Civil War (1861-1865). The European situation was really different from circumstances in North America, however, a fact that had been recognized even before the war.

Thus in 1885 church leaders in Europe sought to find solutions to the issues of compulsory military service and the performance of regular duties on Sabbath. They could not find *the* solution, however, and eventually left it to each Adventist conscript to follow the dictates of his own conscience.

Ellen G. White emphasized that no single, universal answer could apply to these questions because circumstances and conditions may change from country to country. She acknowledged that Adventist conscripts did not go by their own choice but followed the laws of their countries. She encouraged them and prayed for them that they may “be found true soldiers of the cross of Christ” and that God’s angels may “guard them from every temptation.”³ They had to learn how to apply biblical principles to varying situations.

Adventists encountered very different situations in the various European countries. For example, since there was no conscription in Great Britain, Adventists were spared from that requirement. But other countries, such as Germany, Austria-Hungary, and France, relied heavily on conscription, and refusal to obey orders was punishable by imprisonment or execution.

That is why in these countries Adventist conscripts generally did their military service but refused to perform any regular duties on Sabbath “in times of peace.” Some of them were court-martialed to several years of imprisonment for their strict Sabbath observance. Nevertheless, before

the court-martial they frequently stated that they would fight even on the Sabbath when their country were attacked by an enemy. But they would not participate in a war of aggression.⁴

War Is More Complex

When the war broke out in the summer of 1914, Seventh-day Adventists in Central Europe immediately began to recognize its complexity. Who tried to make war on another country? Who was merely trying to defend the homeland? In view of the quick succession of reciprocal war declarations, it was easy to lose track of the situation. Every country claimed to be defending itself against a foreign aggressor.

As armies mobilized, young Adventists were conscripted and dragged into the machinery of war. Some denominational leaders in Germany lost their nerve and assured the military authorities that its conscripts would defend the homeland with weapons even on the Sabbath. At the same time they sought to convince church members that the Old Testament readiness for war was still applicable today.⁵

This position was, admittedly, not entirely new for Adventists in Central Europe. Yet the fact that these leaders practically told church members what they expected from them was certainly unique. A number of individuals voiced their discontent and opposition. The subsequent turmoil and contention could apparently only be stopped by disfellowshipping the “troublemakers,” resulting in further alienation, antagonism, and hard feelings. This internal “war” eventually led to the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement.⁶

In Great Britain circumstances changed when the government introduced general conscription in 1916. Since it provided some exemptions

ENEMIES NO MORE: A German medic surrenders to a British soldier near the end of the “War to End All Wars.”

from combatancy, most British Adventist conscripts were able to register as conscientious objectors and served as noncombatants. This did not spare them from harassment, repressive measures, and prison terms because their superiors and the population in general considered them as “traitors to the national cause” and were unwilling to grant privileges for Sabbathkeepers.⁷

It was difficult for Adventist conscripts to remain true to their convictions regardless of whether they served in the German, French, or British army. What was *the* solution? How should they behave and act under the prevailing circumstances?

The Character of Jesus’ Followers

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) Jesus outlined the laws of His kingdom and gave us a glimpse of the wide framework in which He addressed moral and ethical issues. John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian and ethicist, detected seven ethical principles in that sermon that I find helpful in considering how we can apply biblical principles under changing conditions and circumstances.⁸

1. *An Ethic of Repentance.* Jesus began His preaching ministry with the words “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). What Jesus was calling for was a *metanoia*, a change of mind, a “sorrow for sin and a turning away from it,” as Ellen White put it.⁹

It is noteworthy to realize that the calling of Jesus’ first disciples (verses 18-22) and the ethics of His kingdom (Matt. 5-7) are preceded by a call for a change of mind. Jesus reminds us that His ethics are a characterization of a person whose mind has been changed rather than a description of the ideal secular society or guidelines for a happy, successful life.

2. *An Ethic of Discipleship.* The

DARTMOOR PRISONERS:
These Seventh-day Adventists, pictured in His Majesty’s Prison, Dartmoor, England, risked imprisonment for

the sake of their moral opposition to killing, doing unnecessary work on the Sabbath, and refusing to load ammunition.



Beatitudes address Jesus’ disciples (Matt. 5:1), those who are poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and persecuted for righteousness’ sake, and those who mourn and hunger and thirst for righteousness (verses 3-10). Jesus did not promise temporal rewards (riches, fame, and success), but eternal rewards (the kingdom of heaven, comfort, the earth, satisfaction, mercy, the sight of God, and divine adoption) to His followers who often constitute a minority in society. Yet His disciples are not so much characterized by the rewards they try to gain or the successes they attempt to achieve as by the Lord they seek to reflect and resemble.

3. *An Ethic of Testimony.* Jesus, then, equated disciples with the salt of the earth and the light of the world (verses 13-16). Their words, actions, and behavior testify to the world. If we were soldiers, like some of our European brothers in World War I, what would our testimony about God have looked like? Just ponder the following points. The “enemy” did not choose to be born in a particular country, and he was not responsible for the mistakes of his country’s rulers. Most likely he did not even choose to join the military. As a human brother he is in need of salvation just as I am. So what and how could I communicate to him God’s infinite love and forgiveness?

4. *An Ethic of Fulfillment.* Jesus suggested that the scribes and Pharisees made it easy to keep the law by lowering the standard and by emptying the law of its true meaning. He argued that their refraining from killing or committing adultery focused on external standards—yet they nevertheless harbored hatred and covetousness. They seemed to think that their sinful thoughts and attitudes were unproblematic as long as they did not result in outward transgressions of the law. Nevertheless, Jesus said that He had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it and reveal its fullness (verse 17). He illustrated its true purpose, intensified its application, and created a sense for its spirituality (verses 19-48).

5. *An Ethic of Perfect Love.* We may object, “What does this have to do with military conflicts?” A great deal! Remember that three of Jesus’ six “You have heard . . . but I say to you” examples deal with enmity, violence, and vengeance (verses 21-26, 38-42, 43-48). Loving a friend is nothing special. But Jesus asked His followers to even love those who do not seem to deserve it or who are bent on evil (verses 43-48).

Of course, we may ask, “Don’t we, then, show complicity with their evil intentions?” Would we hold our heavenly Father at fault for loving us and



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CONSCRIPTED: Seventh-day Adventists often volunteered to bomb disposal duty, consistent with their moral convictions to save lives. Several of those pictured here went on to serve the church as pastors, missionaries, and administrators.

giving Jesus for us while we were still sinners—even enemies (Rom. 5:8, 10)? Similarly, Jesus asks us to reflect the perfect love of our heavenly Father and show a creative concern for the salvation of our enemies (Matt. 5:48).

6. *An Ethic of Excess.* By asking “What do you do more than others?” (verse 47), Jesus challenged us to think outside the box. We wonder what others expect from us, what options we have, or what the least bad decision might be. But God often does the unexpected, something that may not be on our list of options. Jesus does not ask us to show off for the sake of witnessing, to simply keep the rules, or to be successful. Rather He asks us to reflect His character. He Himself would possibly ask, “In this situation how will the life-giving power of the Spirit reach beyond available models and options to do a new thing whose very newness will be a witness to divine presence?”¹⁰

7. *An Ethic of Reconciliation.* In His remarks about anger in Matthew 5:21-26 Jesus suggested that an inner attitude of hatred toward a brother is more serious than the outward act. But Jesus was not done yet; He moved on to stress the importance of recon-

ciliation before any true worship can take place. Just as God does everything possible to reconcile the world to Himself, so we, as His children, will portray His character by reconciling ourselves with others.

While persons may outwardly reject participation in acts of violence and killing, they may still harbor an inner attitude of hatred and irreconcilability. Nevertheless, God’s children are ambassadors of His reign and will be characterized by portraying His reconciling love to both friends and enemies.

Reflecting God’s Character—a Worldwide Mission

In World War I, Adventist conscripts in Germany and France found themselves in less than ideal circumstances, yet a number of them tried to obtain positions in the military where they could heal and save rather than inflict wounds. Thus they served as medics, litter bearers, interpreters, cooks, train conductors, etc. Many of them prayed with their comrades, gave Bible studies, distributed evangelistic literature, and worshipped with fellow believers on the Sabbath.

Like them, there are still many

church members around the world who face similar circumstances. At the same time we may live in apparently peaceful circumstances, yet experience internal warfare on a daily basis. We all are tempted to harbor a warlike spirit when we face conflict. God’s children should be characterized primarily by the attempt to resemble God’s character of perfect, excessive, and reconciling love to friends and enemies. Ultimately, Seventh-day Adventists consider it our mission to proclaim the three angels’ messages “to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6) to draw people to Jesus so that they may not perish but be saved. ■

¹ Hartmut Lehmann, *Das Christentum im 20. Jahrhundert: Fragen, Probleme, Perspektiven, Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), vol. VI/9, pp. 141, 142.

² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), book 2, p. 235.

⁴ Ulysse Augsburg, “Un soldat adventiste devant le conseil de guerre,” *Le Messager*, May 1914, pp. 51-54; Gerhard Padderatz, *Conradi und Hamburg: Die Anfänge der deutschen Adventgemeinde (1889-1914) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der organisatorischen, finanziellen und sozialen Aspekte* (Hamburg: author, 1978), pp. 243-253.

⁵ See, for example, Guy Dail, “An unsere lieben Geschwister!” (broadside, Hamburg: Aug. 2, 1914); G. Freund, “Krieg und Gewissen,” *Zions-Wächter*, Dec. 6, 1915, p. 365.

⁶ Helmut H. Kramer, *The Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement (German Reform)* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1988), pp. 9-17.

⁷ Francis M. Wilcox, *Seventh-day Adventists in Time of War* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1936), pp. 253-296.

⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2003), pp. 36-51.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1977), p. 23; cf. pp. 23-36.

¹⁰ Yoder, p. 49.



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