

PRESBYTERIANS AND MILITARY SERVICE



Selective Conscientious Objection and Just War Principles—Q and A

What if I object to a particular war that I believe to be unjust?

“Selective conscientious objection” is the objection to participation in a particular war or wars. Current U.S. law prohibits those who want to “choose their wars” from obtaining status as conscientious objectors. However, “selective objectors” may qualify as legal conscientious objectors under present law if they can demonstrate that based on sincerely held religious, moral, or ethical beliefs, they have reached the conclusion that in the real world of today they could foresee no just war. The Just War Principles may provide a framework to reach such a conclusion.

What are the Just War Principles?

Across the ages, Christians have asked whether, and under what circumstances, going to war may be justified. One result of efforts to respond to these questions has been the development of the Just War Principles. Beginning with the premise that it is wrong for human beings to take the lives of others, these principles identify the circumstances under which the evil done by waging war may be justified. To have a “just war,” all the principles must be met. Thus, just war criteria are a strong presumption against violence, not a means for easily justifying war.

JUST WAR PRINCIPLES:

- War as a last resort—exhausting all other means to resolve conflict before resorting to violence;
- Due proportion—having proportionality (the situation should turn out better than if the nation did not go to war);
- Just cause—having morally just purposes (self-defense or coming to the defense of another nation or people);
- Declared by a legitimate authority—the actual declaration and conduct of the war must be subject to the restraint of legitimate political leadership; and
- Reasonable possibility of success—reasonable assurance that success will take place with the fewest possible casualties and the least damage in the shortest amount of time.

The rules of war embodied in the Geneva Convention and the treaty condemning the use of chemical weapons identify further principles:

- Just means—prohibition of cruel weapons or indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction (such as napalm, antipersonnel bombs, and chemical, nuclear, and biological weapons);

- Just attitude—the conduct of war to reverse an injustice rather than annihilation, vengeance, or revenge;
- The discrimination of combatants and noncombatants and the immunity of noncombatants, especially civilians, from the violence of war; and
- Proper treatment of prisoners of war.

What should I do as a selective conscientious objector?

If a draft is reinstated, it is likely that there will be only a short time to demonstrate your status as a conscientious objector. Therefore, it is important to begin documenting your position now. Persons who are selective objectors should keep a record of their beliefs and activities and should file a copy with the Stated Clerk in the Office of the General Assembly. Even if one is denied classification as a conscientious objector by a local draft board and loses all appeals, the evidence of conscience and sincerity in the file might be a mitigating factor in any subsequent court case. See www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/conscientiousobj.pdf for more information.

Some important suggestions:

- Talk with your family, pastor, church community, and friends about your beliefs and feelings.
- Contact a counseling organization such as the Center on Conscience & War (www.centeronconscience.org) for the latest materials on qualifying as a conscientious objector.
- Start a file of your thoughts and beliefs about peace and nonviolence. It is helpful to show that your beliefs are long-standing, but the recent development of understanding or beliefs is not necessarily a barrier to the acceptance of a claim.
- Keep a record of turning points, life transitions, significant events, and personal decisions that have helped shape and support your beliefs about peace and nonviolence.
- Record reflections about activities in which you lived out your beliefs.
- Keep copies of papers documenting your beliefs and your actions based on those beliefs. If possible, place a set where someone else may access them.
- Gather letters of support from family members, pastors, church leaders, teachers, classmates, and friends who can support your beliefs and actions. Many claims have been strengthened by such support. Sometimes a letter from a person who

disagrees with you but can attest to your beliefs is convincing to the board. You will be required to substantiate your claim; these records will be important.

- REGISTER WITH THE CHURCH! Active members and baptized members of PC(USA) congregations (see *Book of Order*, G.50301), as well as active non-members, seeking status as a conscientious objector are strongly urged to register with the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PC(USA). The Clerk's office will officially validate the date of your decision and will send certified copies of your entire file to your draft board, federal officials of the Selective Service, and any others upon your request. See www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/conscientiousobj.pdf for more details. The Stated Clerk may also interpret the position of the PC(USA) regarding war and military service.

What if I object to nuclear war?

There are those who believe that any modern war has the potential to be a nuclear war and the use of nuclear weapons will never meet any standards of a just war. Some of these claims have been honored by legal authorities and other claims have not. Please file a copy of your beliefs with the Stated Clerk in the Office of the General Assembly of PC(USA) as described earlier.

PC(USA) POLICY

181ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY (1969)

UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE USA

"However, it is now evident that consideration must also be given to providing legal relief for the moral position of the selective conscientious objector. Objection to a particular war judged by the individual conscience to be wrong is a moral obligation which may stem from Christian just war teaching."

- Minutes, 1969, p. 698

Subsequent General Assemblies have reaffirmed this position, with the 204th General Assembly (1992) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) being the most recent to do so.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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