

THE ASSOCIATION OF BIBLE STUDENTS – ITS HISTORIC POSITION
TOWARD WAR

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ORGANIZATION and BACKGROUND of the ASSOCIATION OF BIBLE STUDENTS

THE Association of Bible Students is the name used to describe the independent congregations of Bible Students who mutually accept the fundamental doctrines of Present Truth as promulgated by the late Charles T. Russell through the six volumes of Studies in the Scriptures, Tabernacle Shadows and other of his writings. The Association of Bible Students is composed of groups known by such names as: Chicago Bible Students, Associated Bible Students Church of Greater New York, Berean Bible Students Ecclesia, Associated Bible Students, Dawn Bible Students Ecclesia, Divine Plan Bible Students, Bible Students Congregation of New Brunswick and others. (Ecclesia is a Greek word which in the New Testament is translated Church.)

The Association of Bible Students has no central head or authority. Each congregation is completely autonomous. However, for the most part they are associated by conventions. The movement had its beginning in 1870 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At that time a group of earnest truth-seekers formed a Bible Class for the pursuance of advanced Bible study to withstand the tidal wave of atheism and infidelity then engulfing the Christian world and to unlock the sealed prophecies that seemed on the verge of fulfillment. The Pastor of this congregation was Charles Taze Russell. Being evangelistic in nature, other congregations were soon formed and called themselves Bible Students. They met on Sundays and weeknights to pursue an in-depth study of the Bible and to learn the Christian principles that should govern their lives. In 1879, Pastor Russell founded Zion's Watch Tower, later known as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. This Society did not become the central authority of the Bible Student movement. All the congregations of Bible Students that cooperated with it retained their polity of self-government. This corporation was formed to help coordinate the activities of the Bible Student movement for the spiritual welfare of the movement as a whole and for the work of evangelism.

After the death of Pastor Charles T. Russell in 1916, the founding purposes of The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society soon changed. The six volumes of Studies in the Scriptures and other writings of Pastor Russell were discarded. The congregations in harmony with the Society thereafter relinquished their

autonomy; the Society becoming the central head and authority. Many of the doctrines of the Society became diametrically opposite to the teachings of Pastor Russell. These changes were so drastic that some even caught the public eye, such as refusing blood transfusions and flag saluting. By 1931, over three-quarters of those associated with the Bible Students in Pastor Russell's day rejected these changes.

They severed themselves from this system and formed independent, self-governing congregations. It is these independent and autonomous congregations that make up the Association of Bible Students. The Association of Bible Students is completely separate and distinct in polity, doctrine and practice from The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society as now constituted and its adherents who are now called Jehovah's Witnesses. The format of worship is the same today as that of Bible Students in the early days of the movement, namely, to acquire a better understanding of the Bible and to learn how to practice true Christian living.

HISTORIC POSITION AGAINST PARTICIPATION IN WAR

Unfortunately, the term "historic peace churches" is usually associated with the Quakers, Brethren and Mennonites. Actually, there are other historic peace churches, as for example, the Christadelphians and Seventh Day Adventists. The Association of Bible Students has also been opposed to participation in war since its inception. The following quotations fully demonstrate our historic position:

January 1, 1896, Zion's Reprint:

"Should we favor war and bloodshed in a good cause . . .? What would our Lord do or say on this question? We believe that he would repeat his former words— 'They that take the sword shall perish by the sword.' 'Do good to them that hate you and persecute you.' 'If ye suffer for welldoing, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth on you.' 'My Kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight.' These instructions, however, are not for the world individually or nationally, but for the saints who would walk in their Lord's footsteps."

1904 quotations from the 6th volume of Studies in the Scriptures, page 594:

"Are not we subjects of the great King? And are not all the kingdoms of this world more or less identified with 'the prince of this world,' and his law of selfishness?"

Are we not, therefore, strangers and pilgrims here, and to some extent aliens and foreigners? It is eminently proper that we should love and appreciate every good law and all the servants of the earthly laws, and rejoice that quite the majority of the New Creation live under the highest forms of civil government to be found in the world today, and appreciate this as a divine favor and blessing. Hence, we neither traduce our native country, its rulers, nor its laws; but this does not mean that we must fight for these with carnal weapons, nor that we must increase our responsibilities by voting for them.

“True, governments may not always exempt those opposed to war from participating in it, although a very gracious provision of this kind has in the past been made for some who, like ourselves, believe war to be unrighteous; viz., the Friends, or Quakers, exempted from military duty under specially generous laws.”

September 1, 1915, Zion’s Reprint, article entitled: Christian Duty and the War, which is quoted in part as follows:

“We reflect that to become a member of the army and to put on the military uniform implies the duties and obligations of a soldier as recognized and accepted. A protest made to an officer would be insignificant—the public in general would not know of it. Would not the Christian be really out of his place under such conditions? ‘But,’ someone replies, ‘if one were to refuse the uniform and the military service, he would be shot.’

“We reply that if the presentation were properly made there might be some kind of exoneration; but if not, would it be any worse to be shot because of loyalty to the Prince of Peace and refusal to disobey his order than to be shot while under the banner of these earthly kings and apparently giving them support and, in appearance at least, compromising the teachings of our heavenly King? Of the two deaths, we would prefer the former—prefer to die because of faithfulness to our heavenly King. Certainly the one dying for his loyalty to the principles of the Lord’s teachings would accomplish far more by his death than would the one dying in the trenches. We cannot tell how great the influence would be for peace, for righteousness, for God, if a few hundred of the Lord’s faithful were to follow the course of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and refuse to bow down to the god of war. Like those noble men they might say, ‘Our God is able to deliver us, if

he chooses so to do; but if he does not choose to deliver us, that will not alter our course. We will serve him and follow his direction, come what may'."

July 15, 1916, Zion's Reprint, article entitled: Conscience and the War, which is quoted in part as follows:

"Of course, no country forces aliens into the army; and were it recognized that true Christians are aliens as respects earthly governments, the whole question might solve itself. The Bible Students' claim is that the followers of Jesus have their citizenship in heaven, and that by giving their obedience to the heavenly Lord they renounce in a degree their allegiance to earthly kings—governments. It is for this reason that we have long advocated that the fully consecrated abstain from voting on political issues. If they so vote, they are identifying themselves with the earthly kingdoms, and might properly enough be called upon to shoot as they vote—to support the government which they helped to create.

"On the other hand, the Scriptural proposition is that while our citizenship is in heaven and we are aliens, strangers, and foreigners in the world, with allegiance to the heavenly King, nevertheless, like all other foreigners, we are to be subject to the powers that be—subject to the laws of the country in which we may be living. But if obedience to the laws does not imply military service on the part of the foreigners, so obedience to the laws on the part of Bible Students does not imply military duty. Similarly with the oath of allegiance required by those who enter the Army—they are required to swear allegiance to the king and obedience to the officers of the king in all things. This oath is not required of aliens foreigners, and is objected to by Bible Students, not because they are opposed to law and order or unwilling to be regulated by the government under which they live, but because they have already given allegiance to the higher power—the heavenly Lord. To them his words, his commands, etc., are paramount."

AUGUST 1948, BIBLE STUDENTS GENERAL CONVENTION RESOLUTION:

"Whereas the Congress of the United States has enacted a conscription law and this law affects the young men of our fellowship, we in General Convention assembled at Chautauqua, Ohio, as representatives of the various Bible Student congregations of the United States, take this opportunity to clearly state our

position regarding participation in military service and training in time of peace or time of war.

“For the past sixty years the teachings of Pastor Russell in the Six Volumes of Studies in the Scriptures, Tabernacle Shadows, and other writings, have and still do represent the convictions of all those in our fellowship and service.

“Our convictions are the same today as they were during World War I and World War II. We believe that we as Christians should not engage in military service and training. This conviction is based upon our belief that we are children of God, whose laws forbid participation in war.

“Further, we recognize the individuality of every Christian in the exercising of his conscience in harmony with the obligations or vows he has made to his Creator.

“It is moved that we, The Bible Students General Convention, assembled at the Miami Valley Chautauqua, Chautauqua, Ohio, August 1-8, 1948, declare the above statement is a proper expression of our conscientious convictions.”

This resolution was reaffirmed at the Bible Students General Conventions held in 1965 and 1970 at Bloomington, Indiana, and 1978 and 1982 at Albion, Michigan. The 1978 and 1982 reaffirmations had an amendment to include women of our fellowship.

1981 RESOLUTION

“Whereas the Congress of the United States has enacted a registration law and this law affects the young people of our fellowship, we in convention assembled in Toledo, Ohio, as representatives of various Bible Student congregations of the United States, take this opportunity to state clearly our position regarding participation in war.

“Our convictions are the same today as they were at the inception of the Bible Student fellowship over one hundred years ago.

“We believe that we as Christians should not engage in war. This conviction is based upon our belief that we are children of God, whose laws forbid our participation in war in any form.

“We recognize the right of every Christian to his or her conscientious convictions, but to us of the Bible Students fellowship, participation in war is forbidden by our understanding of the Bible.

“It is moved that we, the Bible Students Convention assembled in Toledo, Ohio, July 21-26, 1981, declare the above statement is a proper expression of our conscientious convictions.”

100% OF MEMBERS HOLD HISTORIC POSITION OF BIBLE STUDENTS ON WAR

Unlike some historic peace churches whose membership only partially hold to the official teachings of the church toward war, the Association of Bible Students can claim a 100% backing of its membership on this teaching. And the faithfulness of member of our fellowship to this teaching has often been in the face of dire consequences. Our fellowship is worldwide and, during the course of World Wars I and II, many of our fellowship in foreign lands endured suffering and oftentimes death for their refusal to participate in war. In Germany, our brethren were singled out for persecution.

The same persecutions are being reenacted amongst our brethren behind the Iron Curtain. But whatever the consequences, great or small, we are compelled, like the Apostle Peter and John of old, “to obey God rather than men.”

WOULD NOT JOIN THE ASSOCIATION OF BIBLE STUDENTS TO EVADE MILITARY SERVICE

Although historically opposed to war, one would be unlikely to join our fellowship as a means to evade military service because the standards of accepted conduct and the rigors of adherence thereto would be too great. In contrast with other churches, the rank and file members of our fellowship give far more of their time, energies, and money, than do the rank and file of other groups. In short, the livelihood of Bible Students becomes there avocation and their religious activities become their vocation.

Outwardly the movement is highly evangelistic with each member actively engaged; inwardly it is profoundly studious, every member of the congregation being a Bible student in his own right. At the meetings of the Association of Bible

Students, intense study, analysis, and research of the Bible is pursued. The pursuance of such a comprehensive course of Bible analysis requires long hours of research and study at home.

The nature of the meetings of the Association of Bible Students is pointedly reflected in an article appearing in the Courier-Journal, Louisville, Kentucky, which is quoted in part below. The reporter, Ora Spaid, went to a different church each Sunday and then made a report of his findings. Here are his observations of but one of the various types of services conducted by the Bible Student ecclesias:

The Courier-Journal, Louisville, Kentucky, Monday morning, March, 23, 1953:

“A Reporter Goes to Church
New Albany Group Quietly Pursues Scriptural Truth as Ancestors Did”

“To a generation that knows the Bible mostly as a source of drama for the movies or something you find in hotel rooms and motor courts, the existence of sincere Bible Students is a surprising phenomenon.

“These students find the Great Book unlimited in its revelations of man’s reason for being. And the coating of symbolism which sometimes conceals the Bible’s meaning to the less diligent is accepted as a challenge by the more profound students.

“The thirty members of the New Albany Bible Students Association are student of this kind. They come from many denominational backgrounds, adhere to no creed, and agree on fundamental doctrine only because each has arrived at common ground with the others through independent study.

“They meet each Sunday in a small room of an apartment house at 425 Bank. Their worship is unusually simple—a hymn or two is sung, a prayer is offered, and the rest of the time is devoted to a forum discussion of some part of the Bible.

“One of the three elected elders acts as moderator. He often refers to charts and drawings on the wall.

“The Sunday Christian would be lost here; a fundamental familiarity with the Bible is assumed, and the discussion goes on from there.”

Thus it can be readily seen that the life of a Bible Student is an active one, too demanding of time, energies, and wealth for one to assume as a means of evading military service.

THE ASSOCIATION OF BIBLE STUDENTS CONSIDERS OBJECTION AN ELEMENTARY CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLE

In most peace churches, conscientious objection is considered a great and profound development of spirituality; whereas, the Association of Bible Students view it as an elementary principle attained early in the Christian life. We feel that the Christian life is divided into four stages: Repentance, conversion, consecration, and sanctification. The scruples of conscientious objection to war are usually developed during the steps of repentance and conversion, which are the very inception of Christian life. This is the stage when the sinful things of this world are given up. Consequently, those in our fellowship develop conscientious principles against participation in war before the step of consecration, which is symbolized by water baptism. The real period of Christian development takes place during the steps of consecration and sanctification, which cover a lifetime. The Apostle Paul took the steps of repentance and conversion momentarily when the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus, but he shows time and again in his writings, that the work of sanctification required all the years of his Christian life.

We do not consider that the historic conscientious objector position of our fellowship represents a new concept in Christian thought or doctrine, but rather a reawakening to the teachings of Jesus as understood and practiced by the early Christian church.