

# Conscientious Objection

A discussion paper  
for Salvationists



The Salvation Army  
Australia  
Moral and Social  
Issues Council



## Conscientious Objection

The intention of discussion papers for Salvationists is to present issues of importance in a way that stimulates thought and discussion. Many of the issues addressed are controversial and give rise to opposing points of view. Although people often think of issues as right or wrong, black or white, it is helpful to consider these issues from different perspectives. These papers are not definitive in themselves but designed to help facilitate prayerful exploration by Salvationists and friends.



This Discussion Paper follows the process of the Faith-Based Facilitation Model of discussion. This is a way of helping people think, talk, explore and respond to issues in the light of their faith. This process causes us to slow down and be deliberate in our thinking, rather than rushing to conclusions or judgements. It takes us through a process of identifying the issue, describing and analysing it, reflecting on it and evaluating our thoughts, and then deciding how our exploration will impact the way we live.

When we think things through with other people, and do so with vulnerability, space is created for God to speak clearly to us through them. We encourage you to listen for God's prompting while discussing or thinking through this topic as you use your God-given intellect to seek God's Kingdom here on earth.

## Contents:

<b>The issue</b>	<b>p5</b>
<b>Describe and analyse</b>	<b>p6</b>
<b>Reflect and evaluate</b>	<b>p8</b>
<b>Decide and plan – how then shall we live?</b>	<b>p12</b>
<b>Additional resources</b>	<b>p13</b>





## The issue

Historically the idea of conscientious objection has been primarily associated with military service, specifically in those situations of government mandated conscription to serve. There have always been Christians who believed that their faith required a position of pacificism. Some would reject any support to military action while others would allow themselves to serve but in strictly noncombative roles.

However, an understanding of conscientious objection has been evolving which is more broadly related to areas where there is a clash between religious beliefs and behaviours, and social or legislative change. In the field of healthcare, for instance, the legalisation of abortion or euthanasia may present challenges to some people of faith in their professional roles.

Some people may be confused about the relationship between ‘religious freedom’ and ‘conscientious objection’. For the purpose of this paper, it may be helpful to think of religious freedom as being more about the right to engage in explicitly religious practices (such as prayer, worship or fasting), while conscientious objection is more specifically about how a person might decide not to fulfill a social or even legal obligation because they believe their faith forbids it.

This discussion paper is intended to help open up respectful conversations about conscientious objection for Salvationists today. These conversations might address questions such as: How can I best understand conflict between my faith and an emerging social issue? What are some of the options for resolving this conflict? What can the Bible and Christian history tell me about how people have handled these issues in the past?



## Describe and analyse

### Statement of position (on Military Service, 1992)

*The Salvation Army respects the right of individuals to arrive at their own decisions, based on personal conviction, on the question of military service. Without seeking to influence any individual in either direction, The Salvation Army offers a full spiritual ministry to those arriving at either decision, with all possible help and guidance.*

*Based on scriptural teaching concerning respect for properly constituted civil authority, The Salvation Army counsels those who object to military service to accept the legal alternative, where such exists.*

While this statement has specific applicability it offers the broader principles across a whole range of issues:

- The Salvation Army accepts that some ethical deliberations by Christians can lead to very different conclusions that are to the satisfaction of individual consciences.
- When decisions made by individuals put them in conflict with the law of the land and/or social expectations, they must be prepared to accept the lawful consequences of such decisions.

### The debate

In healthcare, the idea of conscientious objection has some similarities (for instance, objectors may express unwillingness to take life through abortion or assisted dying) but also significant differences (such as the fact that people are not conscripted into health professions, or the fact that patients may be making informed choices about the medical decisions that affect them, or the fact that there is a lack of consensus across disciplines and religious communities on what constitutes the beginning of life and the significance of quality of life).

Additionally, some have argued that conscientious objection in this context

constitutes “an unethical refusal to treat” and “an abandonment of professional obligations to patients”.<sup>1</sup> This presents some questions, such as: Where healthcare is publicly funded, shouldn't those who are employed under this system abide by its laws and regulations? Alternatively, in privately funded healthcare, can professionals refuse to deliver certain treatments if the patient has alternative treatment pathways? If the patient has no alternative, does a healthcare professional have a right to refuse treatment based on their beliefs?

The debates in this area are complex, and often do not have straightforward answers.

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*i* <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301211517303573>

## Reflect and evaluate

### Some ethical considerations

The origins of the notion of conscientious objection in the military context raises an interesting challenge for The Salvation Army, as an organisation modelled on a paramilitary structure, and which intentionally mirrors a military environment in its organisational language and some of its culture.

What if soldiers or officers object to The Salvation Army's organisational rules on the basis of their faith? How can The Salvation Army navigate its own desire to resist legislated social phenomena (e.g. gambling or same-sex marriage) but retain the right to discipline conscientious resisters in its own ranks?

While we may like to think that our position on issues is the result of rational thinking and that others have failed to fully consider the situation, there is evidence to suggest that our conclusions often come first (triggered, for instance, by tribal allegiance to a group with which we value connection) and that our rationale follows. In churches and faith-based organisations, a cultural position that sets social groups for or against the society in which they exist has been shown to influence beliefs and practices on a range of issues.<sup>ii</sup>

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ii Davies-Kildea, J. "The Salvation Army and the Social Gospel: Reconciling evangelical intent and social concern" PhD Thesis, 2017





## How does scripture inform the way you think about conscientious objection?

### Biblical and theological perspectives

Our founders agreed with the understanding and role of conscience as explained by John Wesley. “In the epistles of St Paul, we may understand by conscience, a faculty or power, implanted by God in every soul that comes into the world, of perceiving what is right or wrong in his own heart or life: in his [attitudes], thoughts, words, and actions. The Christian rule of right or wrong is the Word of God. This alone he receives as his rule of right or wrong.”<sup>iii</sup> But Wesley

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<sup>iii</sup> Wesley J. “The Witness of our own Spirit” in Russie A (ed) *The Essential Works of John Wesley*. Uhrichsville: Barbour Publishing. 2011. p.262



includes a word of warning, our conscience is not an infallible guide, “as every wrong temper [attitude] tends to bribe and blind the judge.”<sup>iv</sup> Conscience “needs careful tending and nurture to make sure that it doesn’t excuse or cripple us.”<sup>v</sup>

The outbreak of the Boer War in 1899 required William Booth to resolve competing positions about military service. Subsequently he stated that he could find no compelling authority in Scripture which required him to ban military service for Salvationists. He also declared that he could find no scriptural warrant for the proposition that it was a Christian

duty to fight in a war.<sup>vi</sup> The outcome of this assessment as summarised by Shaw Clifton was that “ordinary rank and file members followed conscience or instinct and volunteered in the wars or conscientiously objected according to their lights.”<sup>vii</sup>

On almost any contentious issue, Salvationists may be found to hold a position on both sides of the argument, or may choose to not hold a position, each with their own scriptural, historical and faith justification. We are called to respect the decisions of others which may be at variance with our own. To demonise those who reach a different Christian

ethical position is to violate what we believe about them as fellow pilgrims created bearing the image of God.<sup>viii</sup>

Consider the following passages and discuss what they say to you about Christians who take different positions on an issue:

- **Acts 10:** Peter, unclean food, eating with Gentiles and the Holy Spirit
- **Galatians 2:** Paul and Peter disagree on the law
- **Ephesians 6: 1-3** Children, obey your parents – what if you have a different perspective to your parents or another family member?

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iv Wesley J. “Letters to a Member of the Society” in *Russie A* (ed) *The Essential Works of John Wesley*. Uhrichsville: Barbour Publishing. 2011. p.1282

v Lucas, J. *Grace Choices*. Milton Keynes :Spring Harvest Publishing. 2004 p.75

vi Clifton, S. “The Army’s Attitude to War” in *Selected Writings Vol 1*. London: Salvation Books 2010

vii *Ibid*; “according to one’s lights” is a phrase that means one’s beliefs or ideas of what is right.

viii For example see Bramwell Booth concerning our relationship with war time enemies. In *Coutts F. The Better Fight*. London: Salvationist Publishing and Supplies. 1973. p.21

## Decide and plan – how then shall we live?

If we take Wesley's warning that conscience is not an infallible guide, how can we nurture and inform our conscience

so that we act with integrity? Here are a few suggestions:



**1.** Work through issues using the 'Wesleyan quadrilateral', which calls us to see things from multiple perspectives: scripture, reason, tradition and experience.

### **The Bible (first and foremost)**

The Bible is God's word to the human race. This does not mean, though, that it contains specific solutions to all ethical dilemmas and the contexts in which they arise;

### **Tradition**

Tradition expresses the collective wisdom of the Church gathered over time to further guide decision-making;

### **Reason**

Reason is one of God's gifts to us for determining how we might act. For instance, "justice" is a heavily used general moral precept in the Bible, but we often need to reason from the principle to a practical course of action;

### **Experience**

Experience covers a broad space. It can be seen as a reference to Christian conscience as being the way in which God makes us aware of what is right, but our conscience can sometimes be misled, coloured by cultural prejudices and limited by a narrow range of experiences. Experience also refers to factual knowledge. Modern science, including medicine, sociology, psychology, and biology, uses observation to objectively understand the situations we face; the facts discovered can be very important to good ethical decision-making.



- 2.** Examine our own blind spots: Are there alternative scriptural views? Have we been disproportionately influenced by our own ‘tribes’? or by our family or background?
- 3.** Consider the voices of those directly impacted by the issue. Have we fully listened to their experience and perspective?
- 4.** Have your attitudes or perspectives regarding an issue changed over time? What contributed to the change?
- 5.** How do you manage conflicts related to perspectives and positions now? For example, with your friends and family members?
- 6.** Are there people or situations in which you find it easier to “agree to disagree” why?
- 7.** Is it easier to focus on what you disagree on rather than what you agree on regarding an issue with another person? How do you consider both?

## Additional resources

- Various International Positional Statements such as: “Peacemaking” and “The Salvation Army and the State.” [www.salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips](http://www.salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips)
- Healthcare perspectives: <https://ama.com.au/position-statement/conscientious-objection-2019>
- [http://anmf.org.au/documents/policies/P\\_Conscientious\\_Objection.pdf](http://anmf.org.au/documents/policies/P_Conscientious_Objection.pdf)
- <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-ethics-of-conscientious-objection-in-healthcare/10096512>
- <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/cambridge-quarterly-of-healthcare-ethics/issue/98F0F093F8904469C0A25D5DEACFA92A>
- <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/conscientious-objection-to-treatments-frequently-a>

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Developed by



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