

Neutrality, Service, and Conscience

What the Apostles Taught About Caesar, and What the Watchtower Requires

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I. The Cost of a Stand

Jehovah's Witnesses do not vote, do not serve in any military, do not salute flags, do not run for office, and do not sing national anthems. They call this Christian neutrality, and they have paid for it. In Nazi Germany they were among the first religious bodies banned; thousands went to the camps wearing the purple triangle, and almost none signed the declaration that would have freed them. In Malawi they were beaten and driven into exile for refusing a ruling-party card. Nothing in this essay mocks that courage. The question is different: is total withdrawal from civic life what Christ commanded, or an organizational rule laid over a genuine Christian conscience and enforced by the same machinery that enforces everything else?¹

II. The Watchtower Teaching in Its Own Words

The Society teaches that Jesus' followers are "no part of the world" (John 17:16), that he refused an earthly crown (John 6:15), and that his Kingdom—a real government ruling from heaven since 1914—is the only government a Christian may support. All human political systems belong to a world lying in the power of the wicked one (1 John 5:19); Satan offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world, and Jesus did not dispute that they were his to offer (Luke 4:5–6). To vote, hold office, serve in an army, or salute a national emblem is therefore to give Caesar what belongs to God. The Witnesses hold this stand as a mark of loyalty tested under fire, and point to their record under Hitler and in Malawi as proof that it is conviction, not convenience.²

III. What the Apostles Actually Taught

The difficulty is that the apostles taught subjection to the state, not withdrawal from it—and they taught it under Nero, the worst Caesar the Church would know. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1). The authorities are to be obeyed, taxed, and honored (Rom. 13:6–7); they are God's servant "for your good" (Rom. 13:4)—not artifacts of Satan. Peter agrees: "Honor the emperor" (1 Pet. 2:17). This is the same empire that would soon kill both apostles, and still they call its magistracy God's ordinance.³

Nor were soldiers told to desert. When soldiers asked John the Baptist what they should do, he told them to rob no one and be content with their wages (Luke 3:14). Peter baptized the centurion Cornelius, "a devout man," without a word about resigning his commission (Acts 10). Paul used his Roman citizenship and appealed to Caesar's own court (Acts 25:11). "No part of the world" in John's Gospel is set in a prayer about sanctification and sin, about the world's hatred and its false loves—not about the civic existence the same Lord affirmed when he said "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21). Caesar's coin bore Caesar's image and was owed to Caesar; it was not Satan's.⁴

IV. Conscience, Honored Without a Rulebook

The Catholic Church holds together the two truths the Watchtower splits apart. She defends conscientious objection: public authorities, the *Catechism* teaches, should make equitable provision for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience, provided they serve the human community in some other way. She has beatified Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian farmer guillotined in 1943 for refusing to swear Hitler's military oath—a Catholic who did what the Witnesses did, and is honored for it. And she teaches that

participation in public life—voting, service, office—can be a positive duty of love of neighbor (CCC 2239–2240).⁵

The difference is the location of the decision. In Catholic teaching, the formed conscience of the individual weighs the concrete case, and the Church equips it with principle—the just-war criteria, the duty to the common good, the primacy of conscience itself. One believer, so formed, may take up arms in a just defense; another, so formed, may refuse; the Church honors both. In Watchtower practice, the organization decides, and the member’s conscience is free only in the space the organization has left free. One system produces both Jägerstätter and the just soldier, each with a clear conscience; the other produces uniformity, and enforces it with the disfellowshipping machinery.

V. The Accommodation Before the Camps

The heroic record has a first chapter the Society rarely tells. Before the camps, the leadership tried to make terms with Hitler. In June 1933, as the ban fell, Joseph Rutherford convened a Berlin assembly of some seven thousand and issued a “Declaration of Facts”—printed by the millions and mailed to Hitler under a cover letter stating that the movement’s aims were “in complete agreement” with the goals of the national government. The Declaration protested the ban and asked for the freedom to preach. But historians of the period—Detlef Garbe and M. James Penton foremost—document that it also distanced the Witnesses from the Jews then being persecuted, borrowed the regime’s own antisemitic tropes, and denounced Britain and the United States. It was, in substance, a bid for common cause with the very state that would soon imprison them.⁶

The accommodation was refused; the persecution came anyway; and the courage that followed—thousands who would not sign the recantation, who died in the camps rather than deny their faith—was entirely real, and belongs to the rank and file who paid for it. But it followed a leadership that had first sought terms, not led a principled refusal from the start. And the record was afterward revised: the Society’s 1974 Yearbook recast the Declaration as a resolution of protest and laid its tone at the German branch servant’s door. An attempt at accommodation, later rewritten as defiance, is not the fixed principle of neutrality the movement presents; it is the first instance of a pattern this essay will meet twice more.

VI. Malawi and Mexico

The test of whether a rule is principle or policy is whether it binds everywhere, or bends where bending is convenient. In Malawi during the 1960s and 1970s, Witnesses were told that purchasing a card of the ruling Malawi Congress Party—in a one-party state where the card functioned as little more than a civic tax—would violate neutrality. They refused,

and the persecution that followed was appalling: homes burned, women assaulted, tens of thousands driven across the border. Their suffering was real and their sincerity total.

In the very same years, in Mexico, Witness men of military age were permitted to obtain *cartillas*—certificates falsely attesting that they had completed military service—by paying a bribe to officials who signed the men into the reserves without their serving. The branch knew of the arrangement and tolerated it for decades. The contrast was documented from inside the organization by Raymond Franz, a member of the Governing Body itself, who saw the correspondence: the Malawian was forbidden a card that meant almost nothing, while the Mexican was quietly allowed a fraudulent military document. Whatever explains that difference, it is not a principle—and the Malawians who paid the price of the "principle" were never told that their brothers elsewhere were being granted exactly the accommodation they were forbidden.⁷

VII. The Service They Were Imprisoned for Refusing

The clearest case of principle bending to policy is the one that put young men in prison. From the 1940s the Society taught that accepting any alternative civilian service in place of military duty was a compromise of neutrality, a breach of integrity with God. Witnesses obeyed: across many countries and decades, thousands of young men chose imprisonment—often for years—rather than perform the substitute civilian service their governments offered as an accommodation to conscience. Their refusal was held up in the Society's own literature as the model of faithful neutrality.⁸

Then, on 1 May 1996, the Watchtower reversed it. Whether to accept national civilian service, it now said, "is his decision before Jehovah," and elders were to "fully respect the conscience of the brother and continue to regard him as a Christian in good standing." The service that had been a breach of integrity in April was a matter of private conscience in May. No amnesty reached the men already imprisoned for refusing what was now permitted; no acknowledgment was offered to those who had lost years of their freedom to a rule the organization then quietly set aside. A principle that can be switched off by a paragraph, after the faithful have paid for keeping it, was never the law of God it was preached as. It was policy—and the people who suffered most for the old policy were, once again, the ones told after the fact that it had changed.

VIII. What Neutrality Costs the Neighbor

Total abstention is not free, and its bill falls on other people. A community that will not vote, will not serve, and will not hold office still consumes the goods of civil society—the courts Witnesses readily use to defend their liberties, the police who protect their Kingdom Halls, the religious freedom that others fought and voted and sometimes died

to secure. To take the protection while declining every share in sustaining it is not neutrality; it is a subsidy demanded from one's neighbors. The apostolic teaching is heavier still: government is God's servant for the common good, and the Christian's share in that good—paying, voting, serving where he can in conscience—is part of loving the neighbor whose safety depends on it.

The early Church, read whole, held martyrs who refused the emperor's incense *and* soldiers, magistrates, and officials who served the empire without offering it. The Watchtower's picture keeps the first group and erases the second. A conscience formed by the whole of Scripture may still refuse the sword, and the Catholic Church will defend that refusal to the last—but it refuses as a conscience, weighing a concrete case before God, not as a bloc marching to an organizational rule. That is the difference between the integrity the Witnesses genuinely have and the freedom they were never given.⁹

Endnotes

1. On the purple-triangle prisoners and the renunciation declaration, the standard Holocaust literature and the Society's own accounts. Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. John 17:16; 6:15; 1 John 5:19; Luke 4:5–6 (New World Translation as the Society applies them); jw.org, "Why Do Jehovah's Witnesses Maintain Political Neutrality?"
3. Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:17 (RSV).
4. Luke 3:14; Acts 10; 25:11; Matthew 22:21; John 17:15–16 (RSV).
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§2239–2240, 2311; on Bl. Franz Jägerstätter, beatified 2007, the standard biographies (e.g., Gordon Zahn, *In Solitary Witness*).
6. On the "Declaration of Facts" adopted at the Berlin assembly of 25 June 1933, distributed by the Watch Tower Society and forwarded to Hitler under a cover letter, and on its anti-Jewish and anti-Anglo-American content, see Detlef Garbe, *Between Resistance and Martyrdom: Jehovah's Witnesses in the Third Reich*, and M. James Penton, *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Third Reich*. The Society's 1974 *Yearbook* recast the Declaration and attributed its tone to the German branch servant.
7. Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience*, the chapter setting the Malawi persecution beside the Mexican cartilla arrangement, with the internal correspondence; the Malawi persecution is also described in the Society's own *Yearbook* accounts.
8. On the pre-1996 position that accepting alternative service compromised integrity, and the reversal in *The Watchtower*, 1 May 1996, pp. 19–20 ("Questions From Readers"):

“That is his decision before Jehovah,” with elders to “continue to regard him as a Christian in good standing.”

9. Romans 13:4 (RSV); on early Christians in civil and military service alongside the tradition of refusal, the standard patristic surveys.

For Further Reading

Crisis of Conscience, by Raymond Franz—the Malawi–Mexico record from inside the Governing Body.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2234–2246 on citizens and authorities; §§2302–2317 on peace and war. Free online at <https://www.vatican.va>.

In Solitary Witness, by Gordon Zahn—the life of Franz Jägerstätter.

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"Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

—*Matthew 22:21*

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic teaching on citizenship, conscience, and war, and the assessment of the Watchtower's doctrine of neutrality*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.