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A Taxing Dilemma

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A TAXING DILEMMA
An Oration

I appreciate this opportunity to speak today, because the issue I wish to address is of immediate concern to many of us. With our nation at war, I believe that the very idea of the federal taxes we pay being used to support killing should cause any self-respecting Anabaptist earning taxable income to squirm. I'll begin by tell you about my friend, who I'll call Joel.

Joel entered the military right after we graduated together from high school and our Mennonite Youth Fellowship. In the years I've known him we've gone biking, attended church camp, and played in basketball tournaments together. I don't think we usually connected on a very personal level, maybe because our family and religious backgrounds were very different, but we had fun together.

Joel went off to boot camp soon after graduation. Then, last July, he was sent to Afghanistan as a paratrooper. While he was there, my parents and I corresponded with him. He wrote frequent but short letter, about a page and a half of scrawl. Here is an excerpt from one of his letters: "How are you dong? I'm doing pretty good. We just got back from a four-day Mission two days ago. Things went very well. It was a battalion-sized mission. My company struck gold on our objective." My mom pointed out that there was no postage stamp on Joel's letter. He just writes "FREE" up in the right-hand corner, and it gets here.

"But Joel's postage is paid for," I said to my mom. Indeed it is. And who pays for it? We do, American taxpayers. When I start earning more then several thousand dollars a year, I'm

going to be in a tight spot. My government is going to ask me to help pay for a lot more than someone's postage. Soldiers need high-tech clothing a big supply of grenades and bullets, three meals a day, airfare, large military vehicles to travel in, and the \$30,000 the recruiters wave in front of them and tell them they can have for college once they get out of the military. On average, for each soldier it hires, our government spends as much as half a million dollars for technology and other military needs.

What to do about war taxes, spiritually and economically, is one of the most relevant problems in Christianity today--a problem that even most peace churches have expertly ignored. According to the Department of Defense, 2003 federal military spending is \$358 billion, but many sources say that the \$358 billion figure leaves out interest on the national debt due to past military spending. In fact, the War Resisters League claims that the budget for the fiscal year 2004 allots 47% of our income taxes to the military. This means that \$800 billion of the federal budget could go to military investment, provided that we pay up. With these figures in mind, it is no surprise that the taxes Christians pay are essential to the military.

You may ask, "Are you suggesting that we don't pay our taxes? Don't you realize that it would be useless, since the government takes the money anyway, plus fines and penalties?"

I partially agree with that sentiment. In some cases withholding taxes results in the government taking even more. Practicality is important. If my only options are to pay my taxes and avoid trouble or to withhold taxes and end up with the military getting extra money, I would probably pay all my taxes.

But I'm afraid this issue is more complex. In a Sunday School class at my church, someone told the story of how wealthy Russian Mennonites long ago avoided serving in the military by hiring replacements. "What's the difference?" someone muttered. Others in the class

agreed. It seemed that in the eyes of God, there would be little difference between serving in the military and paying someone else to serve in the military.

"Then why don't we talk about our war taxes?" muttered another person in the class.

"Because that would be too relevant," was the sarcastic reply.

It is easy to look at the war tax problem and be overwhelmed by the huge powerful system in which we live. Our fear of what might happen if we fail to comply with the government blinds us from seeing past the insanity of resistance or the possibility of change. Many Christians say, "Tax resistance is hopeless. I'll just keep donating a healthy portion of my income to charity and verbally pressure the government away from war."

It would be nice if we could trust our leaders to respect our verbal requests that our tax money not be spent on war. Nevertheless, the New York Post earlier this year stated, "President Bush yesterday said the big worldwide anti-war protests show 'democracy is a beautiful thing' but they won't stop him from attacking Iraq because his job is to protect America."

President Bush's response to anti-war protests is neither surprising nor unconventional. When thousands of Americans protested vigorously during the Vietnam War, General Alexander Haig said, "Let them march all they want so long as they continue to pay their taxes."

I believe we should exercise a desperate inventiveness to prevent our earnings from funding the military, especially in this time of war. "What would Jesus do?" or "W-W-J-D?" is a popular question. If we have genuine concern for the victims of war, and if we are to continue teaching the young people in our church not to join the military, we need to be consistent in our Peace stance. The war tax dilemma we face demands that we pray to God for inspiration. Go ahead and try it. Say, "Jesus, is there another way?" (J-I-T-A-W? "JITAW?").

Let me tell you about Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, a Christian couple with a reputation for finding "another way." Near the end of WWII they played key roles in escorting 2,300 Russian Mennonites over the Atlantic to South America, to rescue them from Stalin. Now, in the United States, Peter and Elfrieda resist the military establishment by refusing to pay the defense portion of their income taxes. From one of their letters to the IRS, "Today the government does not want us, it wants our money, but is' all the same purpose."

Today, more and more Brethren and Mennonites are pioneering new ways of doing war tax resistance. While working of MCC, Linda Shelly of Mennonite Mission Network nearly eliminated her tax payments not only by taking advantage of charitable-giving tax credits, but also by accepting only about 75% of her salary.

Like Linda, many Christians avoid taxes by earning little or no taxable income. However, resistance for those who earn taxable income is more difficult. Some people in this situation might successfully avoid paying taxes by keeping just enough cash to survive, holding no significant funds in bank accounts, and maintaining a steady flow of money straight to charity. Although doing this poses many risks, it can make tax collection by the IRS expensive, if not impractical. Small groups of tax resisters could decrease the insecurity of living with so little money on hand at any moment by setting up circles of trust and giving or loaning to each other in emergencies.

By current policy, if your earnings are only slightly above the taxable income level, it is possible to legally avoid taxes by putting some income into tax-deferred Individual Retirement Accounts. The, if you live below the taxable income level during retirement, you can withdraw Money from these accounts, tax-free.

There are more methods of tax resistance than the ones I just gave you. To help sort out the complexities of various strategies, several organizations provide war tax literature, as well as Advice and counseling services. A topica.com website provides a forum for war tax resisters to share stories and ask each other questions.

In summary, war tax resistance is difficult and plain scary. But for us to say, "Oh, forget it," is dangerous. In the name of Jesus, we teach our youth that killing others is wrong. In the name of Jesus, we teach that participation in the military is evil, and we exalt the conscientious objectors of the past. That is why my congregation was upset when Joel went off to join the army. We offered Joel very little verbal support. Several people even tried to convince him not to enter the military.

But unless we participate in the war tax struggle, we cannot tell Joel that his career choice is wrong without condemning ourselves. How can we right the hypocrisy of preaching peace while paying for war? Jesus, is there another way?