

## PEACE AND PEACEMAKING IN THE BIBLE AND BEYOND

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper offers an argument on the role of the Christian as peacemaker. The argument is founded on Jesus' and Paul's teachings on peace recorded in the New Testament. It is shown that from the very beginning Christ's followers are commanded, as individuals and as community, to seek and promote peace. In the second part of this paper, peacemaking principles for the church are reevaluated as exemplified by the early church, and still applicable to the contemporary Christian communities.

**KEY WORDS:** peace, peacemaking, Sermon on the Mount, Jesus on peace, Paul on peace, Church as agent of peace.

### **Introduction**

As Jesus spoke to the multitudes on the mountain, the last teaching he gave them was the most controversial of all. He told his listeners to love their enemies and to pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5.44). As we look back over centuries of Christian history, it is evident that this has been the most difficult teaching of Jesus to follow. The further away in time we get from Jesus' utterance the less it seems this lesson has impacted our way of being and relating to others. Indeed, the Christian church has a dark history of violence and hatred, a host of enemies she should have prayed for but instead she fought with. The time has come, I surmise, that Christians rethink their role in the world and assume the mandate given by their Lord – to be a catalyst for peace in a society that knows violence in various forms and at all levels.

My purpose in this article is to rediscover this peacemaking mandate. I argue that the church is called to be a peacemaker in the world. The biblical witness speaks to the fact that Jesus commanded his followers, individually and as a community, to seek peace. The early church followed the principles of peace-

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making Jesus recommended. Therefore, it is imperative that the church nowadays undertakes her peacemaking mandate and considers concrete ways for carrying it out in the world.

### **Peace and Peacemaking – The Biblical Teaching**

For a long time, the peacemaking mandate of the church in the New Testament has been debated based on Jesus' sayings from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). For some these teachings are presenting an impossible ideal, seemingly with the purpose of bringing the hearers to the understanding that they depend totally on God's grace (Buttry 1994: 14). Others would argue that in the context in which Jesus teaches these sayings were meant to offer an alternative way of being, a different model of behavior, other than the passive submission or violent resistance that were the typical responses to the Roman oppressors at the time (Wink 1998: 101). I submit that a *via media* is possible and desirable. In the Sermon on the Mount, the word "peacemaker" is used in the last of the nine beatitudes. Jesus says: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5.9-10). This is then expanded: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5.11-12). Jesus assigns a specific role to his followers, while also hinting that this is an ethic that far surpasses that of the surrounding society. The saying is quite political and provocative since within the context, at that time, the only one who was called "son of god" was the Roman emperor. Also, he would have been acclaimed as the peacemaker, that is, the upholder of the *Pax Romana*. By assigning this title and role to his followers, low class rural inhabitants of the conquered Judaea, Jesus upturns the very world-order of his time – he ascribes the highest standing the society would have known to his disciples (Bainton 1986: 64).

To truly understand Jesus' attitude toward peace and peacemaking, one also needs to turn to the gospel of John. In John 14:27 Jesus tells his disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." This utterance comes at a crucial time. It is the moment when Jesus tells them about his departure from their midst. Undoubtedly, the disciples are distressed. Yet, Jesus bestows his peace upon them and expects them to react accordingly.

Evidently, peace and peacemaking are important to Jesus. In the passage from the gospel of Matthew "peacemaking" is the crowning ethical instruction

given to the multitudes. In the gospel of John, “peace” is the last gift Jesus gives to those who have followed him for years. Given these, we ought to ask what he really means by “peace.” Palmer (1984: 58-60) suggests that there are at least three specifics one could notice: Firstly, the peace Jesus speaks of is a peace divinely ordained – it originates with Jesus himself (John 14.27). Secondly, this peace includes healing – it is the answer to pressure and tribulation (John 16.33). Thirdly, it involves a return to wholeness, for the expectation in all of Jesus’ saying is that the audience will “experience” the peace he offers. All these prove that the peace Jesus speaks about is more than lack of conflict, or inner calmness. He envisions “peace” along the lines of the Hebrew notion of *shalom*, with its implications of comprehensive well-being, restoration to wholeness, and flourishing in all aspects of life (Măcelaru 2017: 53-54; cf. Măcelaru 2014: 233-236 and Măcelaru 2012: 52). As such, the peace Jesus brings is the very fulfilment of Old Testament messianic expectations expressed in texts such as Psalm 72 and Isaiah 11 (cf. Măcelaru 2022b: 132-133; Măcelaru 2016: 134-146). Apostle Paul picks up the same concept of “peace” in Ephesians 2.14-18:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Significantly, the apostle also associates “peace” with another special New Testament term – reconciliation – to explain the act of peacemaking. There is a two-step process here, for before becoming reconciled one ought to experience of repentance. According to Palmer (1984: 60), at this stage one begins to practice restraint, to slow down, and to clear away the debris of sin. In this way the ground is prepared for a second step, a deeper level of “peace.” It is at this level that a human being’s four-fold relationship is restored: the relationship with God, with the neighbor, with the creation and with oneself (Măcelaru 2014: 235-236; cf. Palmer 1984: 60).

Thus, the peacemaking described here is neither a philosophical nor a political notion. It is not fanciful talk about “world peace.” Rather, it is about the gift of God and the yielding of one’s spirit. Jesus gives peace “not as the world gives” (Jn. 14:27). Thus, it is Christ himself that shows the way. At the cross he overcame evil with good, embodying the teaching he gave to his disciples: “But I tell you,

do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5.39). Jesus is not giving here an unrealistic plan for a better world. It is not about smiling when persecuted in the hope that the enemy will repent. The cost of adopting such a behavior was known to him. That is why he warns:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: “No servant is greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. (John 15.18-21)

However, Jesus came preaching and embodying peace (cf. Yoder 1985: 18-19). Jesus was not a demagogue, speaking of things he would not know or practice. Before asking his disciples to be peacemakers he modelled such a life: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15.12-13). Thus, the motivation to love one’s enemies is God’s own love for us. Furthermore, Jesus calls his disciples “friends” (John 15.14-15), hinting at the fact that the obedience of the Christian is not a slave’s answer to her master but a willing imitation of her divine Friend’s *modus operandi*. So, in conflict and suffering, Christians ought to continue the peacemaking work Christ had first begun (Yoder 1985: 35). In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus presents “peacemaking” as the fulfillment of the law:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5.43-48)

This is placed in the context of six antitheses pronounced by Jesus to explain what true fulfillment of the Law is about. Thus, in addition to repeating the ideal of *Imitatio Dei* expressed by the Law (cf. Leviticus 19.18), Jesus commands love for one’s enemy. The follower of Jesus is to love the enemy because that truly makes him a child of the Father, and as the Father is indiscriminately gracious,

so must be his children (Senior 1984: 58). Although at first sight this may appear as a radical commandment, the explanations Jesus further gives show that what we have is an inventive, alternative way of behavior when faced with evil.

Walter Wink (1998: 98) calls this “Jesus’ Third Way”, which contrasts the “flight or fight” response deeply rooted within us. According to Wink, the three examples Jesus gives (Matthew 5.39) are not a model of passive behavior, but a call on the offended and the powerless to take initiative to assert her humanity and therefore to transform the nature of the relationship in the process. Thus, by turning the other cheek one shows that she is not scared, that she does not accept to be victimized, that she is the perpetrator’s equal (Măcelaru 2022a), that she has inherent dignity, and therefore is worthy of respect (see Măcelaru 2021a). When turning the other cheek, the violator cannot hit the other as an inferior, but as an equal. In this way, the supposedly powerless person redefines the relationship and forces the wrongdoer into making a moral choice (Wink 1998: 101).

The same goes for the two other examples Jesus gives. In both the “powerless” person is given the power to act outside the accepted norms of the society and therefore to have the initiative and to transform the situation by reclaiming her humanity without endangering the other (Wink 1998: 103). As he was beaten, tortured and crucified, Jesus embodied his teachings – he prays for the ones mistreating him, showing that he has the moral precedence over the situation. All these prove that it is God’s desire for the world to have and live in peace. The peace God gives is much different from that of the world. It is not only lack of violence, an environment of absence, where people are left on their own. Rather, it is the peace that expresses God’s very character, his grace and generosity (Bernbaum 1984: 247). It is the peace that “transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4.7), for it is neither found within humanity nor is it a result of human reasoning and action. It is God’s gift in Christ. As such, one can only experience it and act accordingly as a peacemaker because of a genuine relationship with God. That is because a fallen human being can become a peacemaker only after being herself reconciled to God.

### **Peace and Peacemaking – The Beyond**

The peacemaking mandate was well understood by first century Christians. Although persecuted and living in a society that accepted and promoted violence, what characterized the first generations of Christians was their emphasis on love and a strong aversion to killing (cf. Bainton 1986: 81). One model in this regard was presented by Tertullian. For him, strict observance of the commandments was more important than the eschatological future that would bring justice. It was not for the Christian to decide on violence and war, but only to obey Christ.

Admittedly, vindication was also part of God's plan, but that would only happen at the return of Christ (cf. Bainton 1986: 81). The second approach formed under the influence of Gnosticism. It consisted of rejection of the Old Testament and contempt towards the body. But the most widely spread was a more pragmatic approach, which proceeded from a redemptive logic. This considered the nature of life on earth and the social constraints accompanying it, which sometimes result in strife, but also objected to war because of commitment to Jesus' teaching. Origen expressed this position as he observes that "men fight sometimes because of hunger, but more frequently because of avarice, the lust of power, an insane craving for vain glory..."; he then continues to show that our warfare is not with other humans but with the spiritual forces that change brothers into enemies (cf. Bainton 1986: 83).

Moving our discussion to the contemporary church, it is now time to ponder about the challenges to peacemaking facing Christians today and the ways in which this mandated can still be carried out. It seems to me that a first problem is the privatization of faith characteristic of today's world. For instance, generation after generation of evangelical Christians have been taught that Christ is a *personal* savior, thus turning the God of all creation into a private deity (Bembaum 1984: 251-252). This is a dichotomous mentality that separates the spiritual from the social and political; one that cannot see Christ as savior of the body and Lord of the Church at the same time. Evangelical Christians tend to emphasize the peace of Christ as the restoration of one's personal relationship with God. Although this is true, it is only partially correct. For Christ's peace includes peace with the neighbor and the creation. As important the vertical relationship of peace is, so are the horizontal ones.

Another issue to bring up here is the politicization of the peace process that led to the idea that peace among nations and states is not at all spiritual and therefore not a direct responsibility of the Christian. It is important however to keep in view the spiritual dimension of peacemaking. Raising one's voice against war and violence is not only political and should not be done only through political means. The Christian knows that she is engaged in a spiritual battle that influences the physical realm. Therefore, speaking for peace would include prayer, and that specifically directed at political issues.

Moreover, a renewed awareness of the full implications of the lordship of Jesus Christ is a decisive factor in the rediscovery of our peacemaking mandate. The New Testament announcement of the Kingdom of God is an affirmation of God's all-encompassing reign (cf. Măcelaru 2009). As such, a correct understanding of what it means that "Christ is the Lord" would necessarily lead to bridging the typical divides – between the sacred and the secular, between the private

and the public (cf. Măcelaru 2021b). This, in turn, would lead to the church's involvement in various forms of concrete peacemaking initiatives, such as: non-violent action (Cartwright and Thistlethwaite 1998), different forms of civil disobedience (Stassen 1998), cooperative conflict resolution (Steele et al 1998), etc. This because the church ought to be an active participant in world affairs, not so much via Christian policymakers, but by itself being a shaper of the world. According to Duane Friesen (1986: 205) there are five facets of such involvement: ethos, example, service, policy, and vocation. As the church demonstrates justice and peace within, she becomes a catalyst for the transformation of the society.

### Conclusions

In John 14.27, Jesus leaves the disciples with these words: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give it to you as the world gives.” Surely, this saying has been interpreted in many ways, from the inner peace of the believer to the outer peace of the community. The second part of the phrase however points strongly to the second option. The world is concerned only with itself and its own wellbeing. Jesus' way is different – he gives his peace to others. His peace is not only for the individual, but also for the group, church, tribe, ethnos, nation – the whole world. As Christians and as the church we should not ignore this aspect of Jesus' example. The mandate we have been given is clear: the peace within must prompt us to be makers of peace in the world.

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