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Blessed are the Peacemakers: Living as Children of God

JESSICA A. WROBLESKI

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God,” Jesus tells his followers in Matthew 5.9 (NRSV).¹ Although it has been a matter of serious debate throughout the centuries since, many Christians have argued that a commitment to pacifism should be one of the distinguishing marks of the disciples of Jesus. According to historians of the Stone-Campbell tradition, most of the early leaders of this Movement, including Alexander Campbell, David Lipscomb and others were committed pacifists like the first-century church that they sought to emulate.² While I strongly believe that Christian work of making peace has political implications, our commitment to peace cannot exist only in the context of violence and international conflict. Rather, peacemaking begins with taking initiatives at a local level. In this paper, I will focus on the significance of peacemaking to the church in light of three closely related points: first, the active nature of peacemaking; second, the importance of peacemaking to the identity and credibility of the church as disciples of Jesus; and third, the crucial role of prayer in all peacemaking efforts.

By focusing the paper in this way, I do not intend to diminish the place of an organized Christian witness for peace in international relations. Within the Sermon on the Mount alone, there are many reasons for Christians to be critical of a national policy of “preemptive defense” and militaristic imperialism. Nevertheless, my emphasis here reflects a conviction that the fundamental reasons for war and violence are the fear, anger and greed of the human heart. Although they may seem inconsequential, even the most local and “domestic” actions—whether they further peace or conflict—will, as leaven, be magnified as they give shape to a larger social world. Furthermore—as I argue in this paper’s second point—if Christians are unable to act as peacemakers in their own churches, families and communities, their action and advocacy of peace will count for little in the context of international politics.

Jesus does not tell Christians to be peaceful by passively avoiding all possible conflict, but rather affirms the blessedness of those who are makers of peace, who are active in God’s work of reconciliation even in non-ideal circumstances. As Glen Stassen—a professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary—has argued, the instructions in the Sermon on the Mount should not be read as a set of “impossible” ideals or spiritual teachings that cannot be practiced in the context of real-world conflict. Rather, the Sermon is comprised of practical initiatives to allow us to participate in God’s delivering reign of peace here and now. In his book, *Just Peacemaking*, as well as in other works, Stassen argues that Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount have been misunderstood as having a twofold structure: 1) you have heard, don’t murder, 2) but I say, don’t even be angry. Interpreting the Sermon in this way easily leads to the conclusion that Jesus’ instructions are unrealistic ideals or heavy demands on human nature. In contrast, Stassen argues that the

1. Cf. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew%205:9;%version=65_ (accessed September 24, 2008): “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.”

2. See, e.g., Michael Casey, “Pacifism,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas Foster et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 587, as well as Thomas Olbricht, “The Peace Heritage of the Churches of Christ,” in *The Fragmentation of the Church and its Unity in Peacemaking*, eds. Jeffrey Gros and John Rempel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

teachings of the Sermon demonstrate a threefold structure, and that the emphasis falls on the third element of his instruction: if (or, possibly, when) you find that you are angry, go and be reconciled with your brother (Matt 5.23), settle matters with adversaries outside of court (v. 24), turn the other cheek (v. 39), go the extra mile (v. 41).³ He argues that once we see the transforming initiative pattern it is easier to understand Jesus' teachings as a way of grace and deliverance from vicious cycles of anger and lust rather than as unrealistic and difficult commandments.

Stassen points to similar instructions in Matthew 18 and in Paul's teaching in Romans (especially chapters 12–14), and from these he develops eight concrete steps for peacemaking: acknowledge alienation and complicity in conflict; go, talk, welcome one another and seek to be reconciled; don't resist revengefully, but take transforming initiatives; invest in justice; love your enemies with actions and by affirming their valid interests; pray for enemies and persevere in prayer; don't judge, but repent and forgive; and practice peacemaking as communities of Christians, as well as individuals.⁴ These practices are better understood as actions to bring peace and transformation in conflict rather than the passive renunciation of rights. Such practices are important within families and congregations, among Christians of different traditions, races and even political affiliations, as well as in relations with non-Christian neighbors, co-workers and friends.

Imagine a congregation in which a conflict has arisen among its members. Perhaps disagreements over the use of church finances or plans for a new building or worship styles or the role of women or simply clashing personalities have led to significant division and even hostility between the differing parties. Though I will discuss only a few of them here, each of the peacemaking steps that Stassen identifies in the Sermon on the Mount are important for Christians to deal with such conflicts in a manner worthy of the followers of Jesus.

The first step is for those involved to acknowledge the alienation without judgment by recognizing the ways that their own actions and attitudes have fueled the conflict: "The first step in Christian peacemaking," Stassen writes, "is not to change the enemy. It is to acknowledge our own ill-suitedness as peacemakers. I can become a peacemaker only when I give up my self-righteous judging and controlling and begin to rely on the transforming initiatives of God's grace."⁵ It is natural and reasonable for people to disagree, and even harsh words can be forgiven; so long as people remain defensive and self-righteous, however, no progress toward peace can be made. A second step⁶ entails going to the person with whom we are angry, talking with them and welcoming them in an attempt to make peace. While this might seem like common sense, in fact it may be more common for people to deal with conflict by avoiding the person with whom they are angry, by talking about the problem behind their back, or by trying to communicate through indirect or passive-aggressive means. Practicing hospitality in our homes and hearts in the context of conflict can also serve to further God's peace by creating spaces in which dialogue can take place, and by serving and welcoming the opponent. Stassen also discusses the implications of the "transforming initiatives" of turning the other cheek, offering one's coat, going the second mile, and giving to the one who begs.

By way of transition I want to note how the steps concerning love for enemies are of particular significance for Christians. In Matthew 5.44 Jesus teaches, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

3. Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 43–45.

4. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

5. *Ibid.*, 60. This point—and those that follow—might seem to be in tension with the claim that peacemaking is something "we" actively do. While I cannot offer a resolution of this here, I see this tension as closely analogous to the dynamic between human acceptance/action and divine initiative/grace.

6. Though elsewhere in the book, Stassen instructively compares the eight steps of peacemaking to the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, there is no indication that he views them as a necessary sequence—either temporally or in terms of their relative importance—beyond the first step of acknowledgment.

so that you may be called sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and the good.” In a similar passage in Luke 6, he instructs his followers to “love your enemies and do good, and expect nothing in return . . . and you will be called sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish” (Luke 6.35). That those who love their enemies are called sons of God points to a connection—even equivalence—between practicing love for enemies and making peace. It requires no stretch of biblical theology to claim that the central purpose of Jesus’ life and death was to make peace between God and a hostile and estranged humanity, and so it is for this reason that the blessing upon peacemakers is that “they shall be called children⁷ of God,” participants in the same mission that was begun in Christ. Indeed, practicing love for enemies is particularly reflective of the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 5.10). For these reasons, some argue that the church cannot ignore Jesus’ teaching on the love of enemies if it wishes to be true to itself.

This brings me to the second point of the paper, which is that the credibility of Christian churches as witnesses of God’s revelation depends directly upon their capacity to act as peacemakers. In John’s Gospel, Jesus prays that those who follow him might become “perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17.23). Here Jesus explains to his disciples that “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (14.9), and prays “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe you sent me” (17.21). Just as our witness to the world depends upon our unity with one another, so too does our unity with one another depend upon being united with Christ in the work of reconciliation and peacemaking.

In his excellent book on this topic, Jack Reese of Abilene Christian University writes: “A hallmark of the church should be the ability of believers to discuss, listen, encourage, and love. We should be able to disagree without acrimony. We should be known, of all people, as instruments of peace, as agents of reconciliation. We ought to love one another so profoundly, serve each other so aggressively, listen to each other so passionately, and respond to each other so humbly, that the Kingdom of God breaks in among us.”⁸ If the church has lost its credibility as witness of God’s truth to the world, it is because we have grown accustomed to treating our enemies as enemies, and—in many cases—our sisters and brothers as enemies.⁹ In contrast to the ways that the world deals with conflict—by taking sides, demonizing the enemy, holding grudges, overpowering the other, breaking contact or giving the “cold shoulder”—Christians are called to make peace by asking forgiveness as well as by forgiving others, by refraining from judgment, by seeking reconciliation through dialogue and by considering the interest of others, and—most importantly—through prayer.

Thus, my final point, which is closely connected to the other two, pertains to the significance of prayer—the movement toward communion with God—to any process of peacemaking. Prayer is not just talking to God about our problems or even seeking God’s grace to change our hearts or the hearts of those with whom we are in conflict. Prayer is also how we “abide”—that is, how we make our home—in God’s love, as John records Jesus telling his disciples in the passages quoted above. Hearts and perspectives may be changed through simply being in God’s presence; allowing our hearts to be examined in the presence of a God of reconciling love may bring reevaluation of our own actions and priorities, a new recognition of the valid

7. Although the term “sons of God” has greater resonance with the identity and mission of Jesus as “Son of God” due to traditional language, I understand this phrase—“they shall be called sons of God”—as being inclusive of sons *and* daughters of God, and generally prefer to use translations that are indicative of the capacity of both women and men to participate fully in Jesus’ ministry of peace.

8. Jack Reese, *The Body Broken: Embracing the Peace of Christ in a Fragmented Church* (Siloam Springs, AK: Leafwood, 2005), 4.

9. Cf. the report from the 1995 consultation of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ, stating “The divisions in the Body of Christ in the world are a counter witness to the Peace sought and proclaimed by the church as the follower of the Prince of Peace who prayed that his disciples might be one . . . In the face of the fragmentation of the church we are agreed on the importance of spiritual formation for unity in peacemaking,” *The Fragmentation of the Church and Its Unity in Peacemaking*, 221, 223.

interests of our adversary, as well as repentance, confession and forgiveness.¹⁰ The practice of silent prayer not only means not talking—it means *learning to listen*—and is as difficult and counter-cultural as it is important. Our desire to express ourselves, to voice our opinions and make ourselves heard, can easily get in the way of fruitful dialogue. But “when we are able to be truly silent, to truly listen, then God can speak.”¹¹

Unity and peace among believers are only possible to the extent that members of the community find their common dwelling place in God’s unconditional love. Henri Nouwen, a Catholic writer on Christian spirituality, explains that the work of peacemaking requires acknowledging that peace is a divine gift, and that prayer is the means by which we learn to dwell in God’s peace: prayer is “living with God, here and now.”¹² Nouwen explains that peacemaking must be rooted in the knowledge and experience of God’s love, which alone is able to free us from the need for success and praise in the eyes of others and the need to defend our actions, our opinions, and our possessions at all costs. At all levels of conflict it is true that “we can speak of peace in the world only when our sense of who we are is not anchored in the world” and “we can bear witness for the Prince of Peace only when our trust is in him and him alone.”¹³

If most of us are honest with ourselves, we know that there are many ways in which our hearts are not at peace. We are wounded, insecure, resentful and lonely, and this restlessness within us causes us to anxiously defend our actions and opinions, to control others and to seek after their love and praise at all costs. “The deeper we enter into the house of God,” however, “the house whose language is prayer, the less dependent we are on the blame or praise of those who surround us, and the freer we are to let our whole being be filled with that first love,” Nouwen writes.¹⁴ It is for this reason that “prayer itself *is* peacemaking, not simply the preparation before, the support during, and the thanksgiving after.” Contrary to the opinion that prayer is what we do when we’ve run out of other options for action, Nouwen writes that “prayer—living in the presence of God—is the most radical peace action we can imagine”—and the most essential.¹⁵

There is much more that might be said about each of these points, and certainly more to say about the Sermon on the Mount and peace in the kingdom of God. For this reason, however—and in conclusion—I want to reiterate that the emphasis of this paper on the level of “personal” or congregational issues should not be taken as an indication that Christians can be nonchalant about political questions of war and peace. Particularly as a tradition that claims to base its identity in the belief and practice of the early church—which was strongly pacifist until the time of Constantine—members of the Churches of Christ should reexamine biblical and church teaching on war and peace in light of our contemporary reality. Even if there may be compelling reasons to eschew an absolute pacifism, faithfulness to Jesus’ life and teaching calls Christians to live as peacemakers and witnesses to the “peace that passes understanding” (Phil 4) in their lives. One of the most essential contexts for this is within the church, which should be “a faithful fellowship of the weak in which, through a repeated confession and forgiveness of sins, the strength of Jesus Christ is celebrated”; the Christian community must be a community of gratitude, of humility, of prayer and of reconciliation.¹⁶ There may never be a perfect church, free from all division or conflict, but the more that Christians are able to abide in prayer, to recognize and confess their weakness before God and one another, and to live as peacemakers by practicing love for enemies, the more truly will they extend the invitation to dwell in the kingdom of peace and proclaim to the world that they are the daughters and sons of God.

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10. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace*, 83.

11. Johann Christoph Arnold, *Seeking Peace* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1998), 71.

12. Henri Nouwen, *Peacework: Prayer, Resistance, Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 32-33.

13. *Ibid.*, 37.

14. *Ibid.*, 36.

15. *Ibid.*, 38.

16. *Ibid.*, 102. Cf. Reese, *The Body Broken*, especially chapter 7, “A Community of Brokenness.”