

THE PRINCE OF PEACE:

A Christian View of War

July 2008

This document is intended as a discussion guide for any group that wants to explore Christian teachings as they relate to the issues of war and peace. It includes some historical perspectives, references to current attempts at international conflict resolution, and some questions for group discussion. The document was prepared by an interfaith group in Elkin, North Carolina, which has been meeting for over a year in an effort to find peaceful ways to resolve international and interpersonal conflicts.

Please make copies of this document if you want to use it for group discussions. We are interested in learning how well this document is received by groups that use it. If you have any feedback for us, please send your comments to freasplace@wilkes.net, or call John Freas at (336) 957-2753.

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GETTING STARTED

Within the Christian community there are a lot of different views concerning war. It is important for people to be able to discuss issues concerning war without feeling judged by their peers for seeing things differently. Consequently, it may be helpful if each session starts with a prayer and ends with a prayer. It also may help if each participant agrees that each person will be given an opportunity to speak without being interrupted, and no one will be ridiculed or criticized for expressing their views.

Sample opening prayer

Lord, we are gathered here in your presence to discuss war and peace. We ask for your guidance, and we ask that you will help us to learn from each other, respect each other, and learn from the teachings of our savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Sample closing prayer

Lord, We thank you for guiding us through this session. As we leave this gathering, we ask that you will continue to lead us and help us to faithfully seek the path you want us to follow. We pray in the name of our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Biblical References

As we look at human history, we see that war has always been a part of human existence. The Old Testament recounts the battles the Israelites fought with their neighbors. There were wars with the Philistines and the Hittites and numerous other local people as well as wars with Egypt, Assyria, and Mesopotamia. People were weary of war after war, and they longed for peace. The prophet Micah wrote “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” (Micah 4:1-4) Isaiah wrote “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, The mighty God, the everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6) After the Jews returned from captivity in Babylon, they were invaded by Rome. It was in this setting that Jesus was born, and the Gospel of Luke proclaimed “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14).

Jesus studied the scriptures and was well aware of the prominent place war had played in the history of his people. He also was able to see first hand how the Roman army was occupying his homeland and oppressing his people. His response was not to seek a military solution. He did not try to overthrow the Romans. Instead, he taught his followers to love their enemies. (Matthew 5:44) He said “blessed are the peacemakers”. (Matthew 5:9) He said if someone offends you, forgive him seventy times seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22) He advised his followers to turn the other cheek. (Matthew 5:38-39) He told Peter to put away his sword. (John 18:10-11) His whole approach to life was based on love and acceptance of people who are different or outcasts. The way he lived and the things he taught were the antithesis of war.

The Early Church

The early Christians followed the teachings of Jesus. They avoided violence and did not take part in war. Then, after Constantine converted to Christianity, he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. He considered Christianity to be an asset in military battles, and from that time on, the official position of the church was changed to be more accepting of war, because the government supported wars, and the government supported the church.

Saint Augustine of Hippo, who lived from 354 to 430 AD advanced the Just War Theory, and this theory has been supported and refined by many people in the church throughout the years. This theory provides a list of criteria which can be used to determine whether or not a war or a proposed war can be justified. It also provides a list of criteria that can be used to determine whether or not a war is being conducted in a just way. The just war theory is described in more detail in the appendix.

The Reformation

During the Middle Ages and the reformation several Christian groups emerged that were opposed to all forms of violence. These included the Franciscans, the Cathars, the Waldensians, the Anabaptists, and the Mennonites to mention only a few. All of these movements experienced harsh persecution, because the government and the government supported church felt threatened by them.

The Quakers

In 1652 the Quakers or Friends originated in England, and they later expanded into the United States. They also experienced harsh persecution, but they have had a profound influence on our society. They were responsible for the first prison reform, the first humane treatment of the insane, And the first school among the Indians. They also advocated the abolition of slavery, and they founded the American Friends Service Committee, which has continued to work for peace throughout the world.

The Quakers firmly believed that violence was wrong and should always be avoided. When faced with conflict, they used a peaceful method to seek reconciliation. The first step was to identify with your adversary. Try to see the world through his eyes. Recognize that each person, even your adversary, was made in the image of God: and try to recognize that part of God that is in your adversary. The second step was to speak truth to power. Tell your adversary the truth as you see it through your own eyes. The third step was to ask your adversary to join with you in meeting for worship. This means that you both sit silently and wait for divine guidance. Step four was to muster within yourself all love, tenderness and concern for your adversary. By following these steps, the Quakers have found great success in resolving conflicts without violence. The Quakers have given us a good example of what it means to be a peacemaker.

Overcoming Oppression

What does it mean to be a peacemaker if you are part of a population that is being oppressed by a cruel government? Gandhi showed us that a strategy called nonviolence could help an oppressed population obtain their rights in India and in parts of South Africa. Then Martin Luther King Jr. successfully used nonviolence to help Black Americans obtain their rights. Later, Lech Wolenza used nonviolence to free the Polish people from communist rule. These three people have given us good examples of what it means to be a peacemaker in relation to oppression. Numerous other oppressed groups have tried to use nonviolence. In some situations it has worked, and in others it has not. It has failed in those situations in which the oppressed people have been provoked into violence.

International Conflicts

What does it mean to be a peacemaker in relation to conflict between nations? Is it possible for the leader of a nation to be a pacifist or to rely entirely on nonviolence? The people we elect to lead our nation are charged with the responsibility of protecting and defending the nation from aggression. In most cases this can be done through diplomatic means. However, are there times when a nation needs to use military force to defend itself? It has been said that one cause of war is unprotected wealth. A good example of this was the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990. Would it be irresponsible for a government to fail to defend its people? Are there situations in which our country needs to use military force to help defend someone else? Many sincere Christians believe violence should always be avoided. Many other sincere Christians believe violence is sometimes necessary as a means of defense.

Perhaps the problem comes when military force is used for some purpose other than defense. In 1846 The United States wanted some land that belonged to Mexico. We created a border conflict, which caused the Mexicans to fire on our troops, and we used that incident to justify the Mexican American war. That was very different from the Second World War in which Germany and Japan were clearly the aggressors, and we responded to protect ourselves and our allies.

With international conflicts, there are several opportunities for one to be a peacemaker. First of all, one can promote social justice. A lot of conflicts are caused by situations in which one nation or group is taking advantage of another nation or group. If we watch for situations in which our government may be taking advantage of others, or failing to respond to the needs of others, or ignoring the religious or cultural requirements of others, we may be able to correct these problems before hostilities escalate. Without social justice, peace cannot endure.

As hostile attitudes develop between nations we usually find each side demonizing the other. During this phase, the government usually engages in propaganda designed to inflame the population and to justify the impending war. This is the time for peacemakers to try to promote diplomacy, encourage dialogue, calm the situation, and suggest alternative ways to deal with the conflict. It is much better to prevent a war than to try to stop it after it has started. Once the first shot is fired, there is a tendency for everyone to rally behind the government and support the war effort. If anyone opposes the war after it has started, they frequently are considered unpatriotic.

Sometimes there is a tendency to describe the enemy in derogatory terms and to portray the enemy as inferior because of the way they look or because of their customs. Military training frequently uses such derogatory references to make it seem acceptable to kill the enemy, because they are portrayed as less than human.

After a war has continued for a while, it becomes more acceptable for people to question whether or not it should continue. During this phase, it becomes more acceptable for people to oppose the war, and peacemakers have a chance of helping to bring it to a conclusion.

When a war is ending, decisions are being made that will either set the stage for a lasting peace, or set the stage for future conflict. This provides another opportunity for peacemakers to advocate for decisions that will not impose hardships on the parties involved.

Then comes the rebuilding phase. The war may have destroyed homes, roads, airports, utilities, industries, schools, and hospitals. There also may be a lot of orphans, refugees, and disabled people. Those who help to rebuild and care for the displaced and wounded certainly are playing an important role as peacemakers.

Current Conflicts

Currently we seem to be facing an adversary that is different than any we have faced before. When the airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center in 2001 many of us asked ourselves “How could anyone hate us that much?” “What can they possibly hope to achieve by doing this?”

Most Muslims are peaceful, caring people who do not seek violence. The Koran specifically prohibits the killing of innocent people. On the other hand, there are some Muslim extremists who have decided that the United States and other Western countries are trying to destroy Islam. Their argument goes something like this: Western countries displaced thousands of Palestinians to create the state of Israel, and the United States has supported Israel for years even though Israel denies basic human rights to the Palestinians. Western countries invaded Islamic countries during the crusades. Later, Western countries colonized some Islamic countries and supported corrupt rulers. Now, Western countries have attacked Afghanistan and Iraq, and have supported Israel in the invasion of Lebanon. The United States has stationed troops in Saudi Arabia for the past several years. Many Muslims see this as a violation of the Prophet, Muhammad’s directive that all of Arabia should be of one religion. Muslims believe that men and women should remain separate until marriage, and alcohol should be avoided. They are offended by the blatant displays of sexuality and alcoholic consumption they see in western countries. One section of the Koran, called the Sharia, contains 500 verses, which are considered the Islamic law. Many Muslims believe that Muslim countries should be governed by this Islamic law. Meanwhile, the United States is trying to make Iraq a democracy. We may see this as a good thing, but some Muslims see it as an effort to destroy Islam.

The tactics used by these extremists are inexcusable, and we must not do anything to reinforce their behavior. On the other hand, when we invade their countries, kill their people, and disrupt their way of life, we are creating more and more militant Muslims who will be our enemies in the future. Is there a more appropriate way for us to respond to these people?

What would happen, if we used the same approach the Quakers have used to deal with conflict? What if we really tried to identify with our adversaries? What if we were to listen to what they have to say and tried to understand what the world looks like through their eyes? We are very fortunate to live in a country that values the freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. On the other hand, if Muslims believe that their countries should live under Islamic law, why should we try to force our way of life on them? Is it really necessary for us to have troops stationed in Saudi Arabia? Why should we spend huge amounts of money defending Israel while not spending an equal amount trying to help the Palestinians?

Then, what would happen if we spoke truth to power by pointing out that the militant Muslims are defeating their purpose by engaging in violence? Both Israel and the United States have a

clear policy of not giving in to the demands of terrorists. As long as a group is using violent tactics, we cannot do what they want because we do not want to reinforce such behavior. On the other hand, we might very well do what they want if they are not using violent tactics. Violence simply breeds violence. It does not lead to reconciliation. This has been shown in Ireland, and Palestine, and numerous other places.

Faith-Based Diplomacy

Then, what would happen if we asked our adversaries to join us in meeting? Douglas Johnston has written a book called “Faith-Based Diplomacy”. It describes how this new peacemaking strategy has been used to bring together people of different faiths in such a way that they are able to move beyond hatred and grudges of the past. Conventional forms of diplomacy frequently fail because they rely on secular principles, which frequently do not allow for forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, and empathy. Conventional diplomacy frequently involves each side posturing for the advantage and not wanting to do or say things that will show weakness. Faith-Based Diplomacy recognizes the religious values that are brought to the situation by each side, and encourages each side to share their experiences, beliefs, hopes, sorrows, and hostile feelings. They listen to one another’s stories. People begin to share their current fears and find more commonality. They begin to identify the needs of the other group. They begin to acknowledge the wrongs done by their own group. Forgiveness becomes possible. Participants are encouraged to envision a restorative justice that is bigger than punishment or revenge, and is based on meeting the needs of people rather than enacting retribution.

This Faith-Based Diplomacy can be conducted by government organizations, but frequently, it is more effective if it is conducted by non-government organizations. It also helps to involve grass roots people instead of just the leaders from both sides, because frequently the leaders cannot bring about reconciliation if the grass roots people still want to fight.

For this kind of diplomacy to work, all parties must commit to treating one another as equals and abstaining from all forms of coercion. Participants must be able to respond with empathy, to walk in the other person’s shoes.

Faith-Based diplomacy has been applied to the conflicts in Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Palestine, Sudan, Bosnia- Herzegovina, and Kosovo. The results are promising.

Speaking From Experience

Another impressive initiative has been conducted by Padraig O’Malley, who was instrumental in securing peace in Ireland; and Satyandranath Ragunanan Maharaj, who helped to get peace in South Africa. These two men have arranged meetings with Sunni and Shiite representatives from Iraq in an effort to end the sectarian violence there. Their basic approach has been to go to Iraq and personally establish relationships with the Sunni and Shiite leaders and personally invite them to attend conferences to discuss the issues. Since O’Malley and Maharaj are able to speak from their own personal experience concerning conflict resolution, they are able to help the people from Iraq see that they also may be able to settle their differences peacefully.

International Cooperation

Jonathan Schell has written a book called “The Unconquerable World”. He traces the history of war from conventional warfare through the cold war into the current conflicts in which oppressed people are trying to achieve independence. He also traces the history of nonviolence and shows how it has been used effectively by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Junior, and how several East European countries have obtained freedom from the Soviet Union through peaceful means. He points out that no rational person would start a nuclear war, and it is not possible to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of other countries indefinitely. He concludes that force is no longer a viable way to protect ourselves from force. Instead, he recommends cooperation among nations to resolve differences and to eliminate nuclear weapons. He explains that the League of Nations was unable to become an effective body for resolving international conflicts because some nations were not willing to enter into power sharing arrangements. Likewise, the United Nations has been ineffective for this purpose because the power was vested in the Security Council which required agreement by all of its members, and that frequently was impossible to obtain. He explains why a different approach is needed, and he outlines some of the factors that need to be considered. On the other hand, he is careful to point out that the new approach to international relations needs to grow out of interaction among the nations of the world, and must not be tied to a plan that someone tries to design independently.

The Crossroads We Face

At this point in our history, we are standing at a crossroads. If we continue on the path of violence, we will continue to see more innocent people killed, more people becoming refugees, and more people who see us as enemies. If instead, we take the path of peace, we will use diplomatic approaches to solve these problems. We will change the way we relate to Muslims throughout the world. We will begin to talk with them, listen to them and see things through their eyes. We will work together to reconcile our differences and to learn to live together in peace. Neither approach can guarantee success, but Jesus calls us to be peacemakers. If we look at the way he lived and the things he taught, we can see which path he wants us to follow.

APPENDIX

The following criteria of the Just War theory was taken from Wikipedia

Criteria of Just War theory

Just War Theory has two sets of criteria. The first establishing the right to go to war; the second establishing the right conduct within war.

The right to go to war

Just cause

The reason for going to war needs to be just and can therefore be recapturing things taken or punishing people who have done wrong. A contemporary view of just cause was expressed in 1993 when the US Catholic Conference said: *"Force may be used only to correct a grave, public evil, i.e., aggression or massive violation of the basic human rights of whole populations."*

Comparative justice

While there may be rights and wrongs on all sides of a conflict, to override the presumption against the use of force, the injustice suffered by one party must significantly outweigh that suffered by the other. Some theorists omit this term, seeing it as fertile ground for exploitation by bellicose regimes.

Legitimate authority

Only duly constituted public authorities may wage war. Today it is frequently felt that the United Nations must sanction a war before it is just.

Right intention

Force may be used only in a truly just cause and solely for that purpose—correcting a suffered wrong is considered a right intention, while material gain or maintaining economies is not.

Probability of success

Arms may not be used in a futile cause or in a case where disproportionate measures are required to achieve success;

Last resort

Force may be used only after all peaceful and viable alternatives have been seriously tried and exhausted or are clearly not practical. It may be clear that the other side is using negotiations as a delaying tactic and will not make meaningful concessions.

Proportionality

The anticipated benefits of waging a war must be proportionate to its expected evils or harms.

Conduct within a war

Once war has begun, just war theory also directs how combatants are to act:

Distinction

Just war conduct should be governed by the principle of distinction. The acts of war should be directed towards enemy combatants, and not towards non-combatants caught in circumstances they did not create. The prohibited acts include bombing civilian residential areas that include no military target and committing acts of terrorism or reprisal against ordinary civilians.

Proportionality

Just war conduct should be governed by the principle of proportionality. The force used must be proportional to the wrong endured, and to the possible good that may come. The more disproportional the number of collateral civilian deaths, the more suspect will be the sincerity of a belligerent nation's claim to justness of a war it fights.

Military necessity

Just war conduct should be governed by the principle of minimum force. An attack or action must be intended to help in the military defeat of the enemy, it must be an attack on a military objective, and the harm caused to civilians or civilian property must be proportional and not excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. This principle is meant to limit excessive and unnecessary death and destruction.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When you look at the teachings of Jesus, do you think they direct us to avoid war or to engage only in “Just Wars”, or do you think he would have us choose another course?
2. If we disagree with the behavior of another person or another group or another country, should we enter into dialogue with them or threaten them or take some other action? What would Jesus do? Which approach would we want done unto us?
3. Have we ever entered into a war that met all the criteria of a just war?
4. Is it possible to conduct a war in this day and age without extensive civilian casualties and extensive disruption of the lives of innocent people?
5. Some people think war can be prevented by promoting justice, equality of opportunity, mutual respect, self-determination, and open communication. What do you think?
6. As individuals and as a nation how can we focus on promoting justice, equality of opportunity, mutual respect, self-determination, and open communication?
7. How important is it for our nation to become more wealthy, more powerful, and more able to force our will on other nations?

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