

On Being a Living Peace Church

Jeremiah 6:13-14; Romans 12:1-2, 14-21

CWZepp, BWCOB, August 31, 2008

There was once a man who grew up in a small country church which taught their children to take their Bible at its word and to believe it. And so when they taught this boy that the Bible said that Jonah was swallowed by a whale, he believed it. In Sunday school, when he heard about Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea, he accepted it face value. He grew up believing what the Bible said.

When he turned eighteen, this boy received the letter that all eighteen year old males in America receive telling him that he needed to register for the draft. So he sat down and wrote a polite letter to his draft board saying that he could not do what they asked of him because he was a Christian, and the Bible said that Jesus told his followers to turn the other cheek, to not take up the sword, and to be willing to die rather than to kill.

True to what he had been taught in Sunday school, he took what the Bible said seriously. He believed Jesus had meant what he said about loving our enemies and turning the other cheek. But when his church found out about his letter, they were not at all pleased. In fact, they disowned him, and this exasperated the young man. "Where do you think I got this stuff?" he asked them. "You're the ones who made me memorize scripture. You're the ones who told me that Jesus wanted me for a disciple. Did you not expect me to do what he taught me?"

This man's story is not at all unique. Outside of the historic peace churches – the Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren – young people who read the Bible and come to what could be considered a rather simple and obvious conclusion that they should not resort to violence or participate in warfare because of the example and teachings of Jesus often find little support for their stand among the Christian churches. Even within the historic peace churches these days, a young conscientious objector might very well face questions and even ridicule because of his stand. And one of the most perplexing ironies in the Christian church today is that those churches which claim a literalistic and/or fundamentalistic reading of the scriptures consistently find a way to gloss over such teachings of Jesus as Matthew 5:39 – "Do not resist an evil-doer, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

This reality begs the question: If all Christians are reading the same Bible and following the same Jesus, how is it that there can be such a discrepancy in Christian beliefs about war? How can Christians read the Sermon on the Mount, with Jesus' blessing for the peacemakers and his clear teaching to turn the other cheek and love your enemies, and then in good conscience be willing to take up arms in military service? How have Christians who have heard Jesus' rebuke of Peter to put down his sword advocate violent crusades against evil? On the flip side, how can pacifist Christians maintain that their commitment to non-violence is the mandate of Christ when the vast majority of Christians, both historically and at present, disagree with them?

To wrestle with these questions is a daunting task. Despite all the preachers and politicians who try to tell us that our responsibilities and duties regarding military service are clear, or who try to downplay the ethical dilemmas involved in making or participating in war, there are no easy answers to the problem of violence for Christians. As with any issue, scriptures can be selected and quoted to support a variety of beliefs and positions on the subject. Authorities from the past and present, in both the church and the state, have raised their voices on all sides. And the justification for the various positions is not always clear or consistent. But to live with integrity in this world, we *must* struggle with this issue. To be a Christian in our world today, perhaps more so now than ever, requires that we probe the depths of our faith for its relevance and its mandate in a violent world. Our beliefs about, and our responses to, violence and war must be ones that we can live by with faithfulness, honesty, and consistency.

Now from its beginnings in the 18th century, the Church of the Brethren has ascribed to the principles and practice of biblical pacifism and nonviolence. Indeed, for much of our history, adherence to this belief was a requirement and a test of membership, and to decide or act otherwise often resulted in disfellowship. Now while such strict observance of a pacifist position is no longer practiced in most of our congregations today, pacifism remains one of the most strongly held and articulated positions in the Church of the Brethren, albeit in many degrees and varieties, with our Annual Conference repeatedly affirming the position that “all war is sin.” And within the past century, we have joined with the Mennonites and the Quakers in earning international distinction as one of the three “Historic Peace Churches” for our shared convictions in resisting warfare and violence.

But pacifism is not the sole domain of the Historic Peace Churches. While the Brethren, Mennonites, and Quakers remain the only major denominational bodies to go on official record in opposition to war in both theory and practice, church historians are nearly unanimous in agreement that pacifism was the norm and the expectation of the early church during its first 150 or so years. It was not until Constantine that Christian attitudes toward violence shifted dramatically away from pacifism and toward embracing full participation in warfare. But since that time individuals and groups in nearly all Christian fellowships have held pacifist beliefs in defiance of the majority. And the pages of history are filled with the witness of martyrs who proved willing to die for their faith without resorting to violence, at times even *because* they refused to resort to violence or to comply with the military obligations of the state.

Why has this been so? The primary reason that the early church, the Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren, and so many others throughout history have been willing to suffer and die rather than take up arms in violence or even self-defense is because of the teachings and example of Jesus in the Gospels. This is the foundation for almost all Christian pacifism. Jesus contradicts conventional “eye for an eye” wisdom when he tells his followers to turn the other cheek and refuse to resist an evil doer. He subverts traditionally morality when he insists that his disciples love not only their neighbors but also their enemies. He blesses the peacemakers, mandates prayer for those who persecute us, and maintains that it is a blessing to suffer for the gospel. Not only does Jesus teach these lessons, but he lives them, providing the ultimate lesson and example in his journey to the cross. It is not very hard to establish a convincing biblical argument that Jesus taught and lived a non-violent faith.

So with a strong biblical case for pacifism, a pacifist early church, and the modern witness of the Historic Peace Churches, including our own, how is it that pacifism is not normative for Christians? Why do young men who take a stand against mandatory draft registration usually not find allies in their “Bible believing” churches? And why is it that in the last 100 years, over one third of Brethren members have come to declare that they would accept full military service if conscripted, with many even volunteering for military service without shame?

The answer is often quite simple, and is based in the clash of our ideals with the “real world.” The long and short of it is that Christian pacifism works fine in a utopia of mutual love and peaceful community. But in the real world, the fallen world in which Christians must now live, pacifism can appear not only foolish, but negligent. Martin Luther expressed this concern well when he wrote, “[People] should...consider how great the plague is that war prevents. If people were good and wanted to keep peace, war would be the greatest plague on earth. But what are you going to do about the fact that people will not keep the peace but rob, steal, kill, outrage women and children, and take away property and honour?”

Do human beings not have a right to defend themselves when they are attacked? Do not governments, including those of Christian persuasion, have an obligation to provide for the security of their citizens, a security that in reality can only be provided by a strong military? And do not all citizens have an obligation to help bear the burden of this national defense?

If everyone were to be pacifists, what would we do when faced with the Hitler’s of the world? This very question led the twentieth century German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a committed and articulate Christian pacifist, to become actively involved in a plot to assassinate the dictator. When forced to confront the reality of evil in our world, Christian pacifism is sometimes found lacking in its response. On the other hand, while the other classical Christian positions on war may not have as strong a biblical foundation as pacifism, particularly in the New Testament, they have traditionally been much better at addressing the problem of evil in our world. The so called “just war” theory – the most commonly held Christian attitude toward war since the fifth century – agrees that war is evil and contrary to God’s will, but maintains that in our corrupt and sinful world, human beings must often choose not between good and evil, but rather between degrees and varieties of evil. Just war thus argues that war and the use of force is a sometimes necessary and lesser evil in order to protect the innocent and ensure a just and humane social order. The other common Christian attitude to war – the crusade (a word which unfortunately now carries the negative connotations of its medieval abuses) – goes even farther by maintaining that good must actively and aggressively engage in the fight against evil and thus carry out God’s will as the champions and warriors for good in the world. This attitude is alive and well today in our nation’s current war on terror, which in its essence affirms that good (and thus God) is on our side in a pre-emptive struggle against evil.

Many Christians – in fact most Christians – have bought into these understandings of violence and war. And I think one of the main reasons so many Christians have supported our nation’s war on terror is not so much that they think war is the best way

or the way to which Jesus calls them. But rather, I believe that most Christians feel a responsibility to their fellow human beings, and want to do the right thing. I think that most Christians see fighting a very real and present evil, such as we find in the threat of militant terrorists, as an opportunity to stand up for goodness and truth and freedom in this world. They see it as their duty as a Christian to defend what is right and good.

Christian pacifists, or even those advocating a just war, (who hold that legitimate warfare can only be waged in self-defense or in defense of weaker neighbors) too often allow the only alternative to be non-action – which is that say that we must allow evil the run of the earth. And for those who want to make this world a better place, for those who accept some degree of responsibility for the kind of world in which we live, this is simply not an acceptable option, regardless of what Jesus, or the Bible, or the church says. Good men and women are simply not willing to sit by idly and allow evil to overtake their world while they do nothing in response.

And for that, I think we should offer our thanks and our gratitude. Even if I disagree that war is an acceptable or effective way to engage and fight evil in our world, I could never condemn those who are willing to do all that is within their power to make this world a better place. We do a frightful disservice to the cause of peace and create deep wounds in the body of Christ when we speak against those who in good conscience are willing to put their life on the line to do what they believe is right and good. They deserve our love, care, and respect, and that is why programs such as the “Welcome Home Project” of On Earth Peace are so important.

But I do believe we are called by Christ to commit our energies and our lives to something higher. Yet I also believe that one of the great failures of the Christian peace witness throughout history has been failing to articulate and promote a viable positive alternative to war. As Jim Wallis told our Brethren youth at National Youth Conference a few years ago – protests are fine, but alternatives are much better. Too often in our history, those who have advocated peace in the Christian church have relied on the scriptures and the example and teaching of Jesus to protest participation in war and violent activity, but they have failed to offer an alternative that does not allow evil the upper hand. Too often the Peace Churches, our own included, have opted for a soap box of ideology and principle, and have allowed others to do all the dirty work while maintaining our own purity in non-participation.

And I believe also that we who would advocate for peace have too often allowed the world to define the meaning of peace. We have accepted the notion that peace is the absence of war. This gives credence to the military argument that war can serve the cause of peace. If we display our strength, if we render our enemies helpless or impotent, if we use force as a deterrent, the result is peace, IF we accept the idea that a ceasefire equals peace. And that is just what the world does. When Rome became so powerful that no one dared wage war against it, that time became known as the Pax Romana, or the “Roman Peace.” During the Reagan era, the Air Force developed a bomber so powerful that it was nicknamed the “Peacekeeper”. The nuclear crisis which our world now continues to face stems from the belief that the more terrible the threat, the more likely that fear of its use will result in peace. Win the war on terror by eliminating the terrorists or making them afraid to act, and we will find peace. That is

what the world teaches us. And so we have all too often believed. But to all that I say no, no, no.

The truth is that peace, the kind of peace that Jesus taught and lived, and the true peace that Jesus offers to us and to our world now, is not the absence of conflict or strife. True peace is, instead, the presence of something very precious. It is not passive abdication, but rather an active power of God's spirit flowing outward from the hearts of people. It is a grace and a tranquility and a respect between people and nations and families that begins within the hearts of individuals and moves outward from them like ripples in a pond. This is the peace that is referred to in Hebrew as "Shalom" – which is just as well translated as "wholeness" or "well-being." This is the peace that Jesus knew and advanced and makes possible. It is not the absence of war so much as the fullness of life.

And so today, the witness of the Peace Churches needs to take on a different flavor. Rather than simply opposing military service and advocating conscientious objection, we are beginning to formulate and articulate more viable alternatives that promote the Shalom of Jesus Christ. With the examples of faithful Brethren like John Kline, M.R. Zigler, Dan West, and Ted Studebaker, we are realizing that being a peacemaker involves more than refusing to fight in war, but requires self-sacrifice and life-long dedication for the cause of actively making peace. No longer are we content to be simply Historic Peace churches, and so five years ago our denomination called us to be more fully a "Living" Peace church. We must repent of an ethic that speaks "peace" and refuses to work actively to achieve it. We must allow ourselves and our understanding of peace to be transformed, and we must begin to present our selves as living sacrifices in order that God's will might be done through us rather than in spite of us. We must come forward with an alternative to war, with the radical notion that instead of killing our enemies we ought to serve them and pray for them, that we ought to root out the roots and the seeds of terrorism by working for justice and equality. Our church today, if we are to be a living peace church must live according to the biblical mandate to overcome evil not with more evil, but with good.

The essence of the transformation that has happened and is happening in our churches is the growing conviction that there can be no peace without justice. God's Shalom does not come in the absence of violence, but in the presence of wholeness, of wellbeing, of peace and fullness of life. And so Christ's call to us is to do more than to resist warfare. It is to also work actively for justice. The two cannot be separated, but go together hand in hand. Perhaps Archbishop Desmond Tutu said it best in his lecture at the reception of his Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. He said, "If we want peace...let us work for justice. Let us beat our swords into ploughshares. God calls us to be fellow workers with Him, so that we can extend His Kingdom of Shalom, of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, joy and reconciliation, so that the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever."

Such is the goal and the desire of a Living Peace Church. And such is the witness of Jesus Christ. The work of Jesus that we in the Church of the Brethren must believe we are called to continue is at its heart a work for peace and justice. Whether it is announcing the good news, ministering to human need, or resisting and overcoming oppression, this work in the Spirit of Christ promotes the cause of a just and living

peace – the Shalom and fullness of life to which we believe all of God’s children are entitled.

So let us be peacemakers. Let us be a living peace church. And let us follow the way taught by Jesus Christ, who showed us how to overcome evil with good. Let us continue his shalom work.

Amen.

The Peace Prayer of St. Francis

O Lord,
Make us instruments of your peace
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine master,
Grant that we may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.