

The Biblical Hermeneutics of Peacemaking

W. Sibley Towner

Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Va.

I. The Centerpoint of Scripture

Peacemaking is not an aspect of the gospel. It is not a spin-off of the gospel. It *is* the gospel.

Listen to the gospel as its earliest witness, Paul, recounts it:

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:19).

That sentence describes a process of peacemaking even as it describes the heart of the gospel. It contains four components: 1) "God was in Christ . . ." The initiative comes from God. (We have always messed up trying to do it on our own, and now we are at a point in human and technological history where we can't afford even one more mess-up); 2) "reconciling the world to himself . . ." Peace, not hostility, is the natural and original condition of humanity. (We assume that reconciliation is the same as making peace. God's work is to restore a right relationship of peace. In peace we find our true selves); 3) "not counting our trespasses against us . . ." Peace springs from God's forgiveness of our trespasses. (We are most warlike and hostile when we hate ourselves; individual or collective consciousness of inner evil and of guilt are the main barriers to peace); 4) "and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation . . ." Public peacemaking flows from the attainment of inner peace. (It is an insight which Jesus, Ghandi, Martin Luther King all had; it is an insight which contemporary social psychologists and political scientists have as well. Richard Barnet, for example: It is all important that we "build a society where we can achieve that inner peace that is the precondition of a peaceful world.")

I think that is a realistic position. But why shouldn't it be? Our faith is a realistic, not an idealistic one, and it takes human nature very seriously.

My basic claim, then, is that the reality of peace and the possibility of peacemaking are the heart of the gospel message. Such a claim immediately becomes a hermeneutical or interpretive principle for this reason: It is a centerpoint against which to test other claims and narratives of the Bible. You will recognize it as the great Reformation guide: "Scripture is its own interpreter." So when people find Jesus saying, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matt. 10:34); or someone finds in Eccl. 3:8, "[there is] a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace"; or someone reads Psalm 137:9, "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!"; or someone discovers the holy war in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and

Joshua, direct them to the centerpoint! Have them read "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. . . ." Then let them tell which theme of the Bible overbalances and comprehends the other. The fact is that war is out-flanked by peace!

I understand that the emphasis of the church on peacemaking is not intended to make believers out of non-believers in peace, (these being very few exponents of violence) but rather to equip the saints for the ministry of peacemaking. My reflections are more a *how to* than a stirring call to lay down arms: how to use the Bible to promote peace. In a sense, my job is a methodological one, so that is why I decided to come straight to the point and to set forth the claim that peacemaking and the gospel are fundamentally at one. In every respect, Jesus' ministry is a ministry of reconciliation and of peacemaking. Paul sums it up in his realistic, fundamental passage in 2 Cor. 5:19. These observations can be used, as I have done, to establish a centerpoint in scripture. Not all scripture says the same thing about war and peace; not all scripture is of equal significance on the subject. We have a touchstone by which to test the scriptures.

II. *The Problem of Method: A Concordance and the Word Book*

But what do we do next? A temptation would be to take a concordance and work through all the texts in the Bible that contain words like "peace . . . tranquility . . . reconciliation"; and indeed that is instructive. For one thing, it reveals that the really big users of at least the language of peace are not Jesus and Paul at all, but the psalmists and Isaiah. Jeremiah uses *shalom* a lot, too, but often it is against the false prophets who teach the discredited notion that Yahweh will allow no harm to befall Jerusalem, and so say, "peace, peace," when there is no peace. But the problem with this concordance approach finally is that it produces too much raw material, too undigested and diverse to have a clear, precise impact on a confused and troubled people. Perhaps the concordance approach should be spread out over the whole year in the manner of daily Bible readings.

Another temptation is to take a theological word book like Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and get into the etymology of the relevant words—*shalom*, *eirene*, and the like. Certainly it is helpful to know that at the root, *shalom* has to do with wholeness, health, and peace arising from inner wellbeing. One discovers that it can even mean "submission to the will of God" as in Job 22:21: "Agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you." (You will recognize that this last notion is not far from the fundamental tenet of Islam, which is after all an Arabic noun derived from the same root *s-l-m*, and which means "submission.") But this approach has its limitations also. Once you've said that *shalom* means inner peace and wellbeing, what more can you say? Most of the limitations center around the remoteness of root meanings from everyday usage. We don't even know the root meanings of our English words. (For example, when you last used the word "garble," did you consider that it comes from the Italian *garbellare*, through Arabic from Late Latin *cribellum*, "a sieve"?) Why should we assume, then,

that speakers and writers of biblical Hebrew and Greek knew what they were saying at the root any more than we do, or that they faithfully carried the same connotations every time they used a word?

III. *An Analogical Method*

The next step in bringing biblical truth to bear upon the question of peacemaking in 1983 seems to me, then, simply to work back and forth between the issues which we know from our context have much to do with making and keeping peace, and the biblical address to those same issues, or at least the ancient version of them. The way in which these texts address us is by analogy. The prescriptions which these texts write for the ills of their own times will serve as illuminating prototypes for the often far more elaborate and sophisticated counterpart prescriptions which we will need to offer our age. I stress this point of analogy, lest we think we can pull texts straight out of the Bible and slap them like Band-Aids or bumper stickers on the woes which beset us and make them all better. There are many ways of talking about this analogical method: prototype and counterpart, or even the well-known distinction pioneered by Krister Stendahl, what the text meant and what it means.

IV. *Nine Biblical Analogues to Aspects of Peacemaking in 1983*

Let me lift up nine texts, each of which addresses an issue which we in one way or another affiliate with the crisis of peacemaking in our own time. This may look like a Roman candle approach, and in a way it is. So much of the Bible bears on the issues of peace, and yet to say peace is everywhere runs the risk of losing the specificity of texts which deal with concrete issues related to peace. In these examples I try to be specific about what the text meant, and by analogy, what it may mean to our peacemaking efforts.

1. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love." (1 John 4:18).

I experience a lot of fear these days. I assume I am not alone. When I go to the Chesapeake Bay, go out in a boat, and look at the marvelous many-hued sky of evening, the distant lights on the opposite shore, and see the cormorants and gulls, sometimes I feel the peace I knew as a youth. But more often I feel a prevailing sense of doom. What will it look like when that horizon in the direction of Washington is lit with a light many times brighter than the setting sun? And then the other horizon in the direction of Norfolk, and then the Richmond horizon? Where will Jane and I hide from the poisonous cloud? Where will our children be? Will all the gulls die, or just go blind because of the depletion of the ozone layer? I know I am not alone in this fear. My children don't want to bear children of their own. Robert Jay Lifton, the Yale psychiatrist, finds the nuclear contradiction of safety through terror a profound psychological burden for thousands of persons in our time. The novelists reflect

the fear back to us: Morris West in *The Clowns of God*, where the fear of the upcoming holocaust animates a German professor into social action and causes a pope to abdicate; Russell Hoban in *Riddley Walker*, all written in a rude, broken English as spoken by primitive descendants of the survivors of the one big one; Walker Percy in *Love in the Ruins*, a book shot through with a low-grade sense of terror for an apocalypse that finally doesn't happen. It even gives rise to gallows humor. When the poet Richard Armour read a news item in the paper, he was moved to write a poem. The newspaper said: "A speaker at a meeting of the New York Frozen Food Locker Association declared that the best hiding place in the event of an atomic explosion is a frozen food locker, where 'radiation will not penetrate.'" The poem he wrote is this:

"Move over, ham
And quartered cow
My Geiger says
The time is now.

Yes, now I lay me
Down to sleep,
And if I die,
At least I'll keep."¹

"Perfect love casts out fear.' True, the text in 1 John is speaking about the fear of eternal judgment, driven out by the perfect love of God. But the text can serve us as a legitimate prototype to all of our teachings that we *can escape* the paralysis which emanates from fear of the ultimate, the fear that we finally are not going to make it. The text means more to us than it meant in its own Judgment Day context. It means not only that we can be set free of fear of judgment, but also that—in trust that God will complete his redemptive work in this creation of his—we can be liberated from paralyzing fear of our proximate doom and get up and come out fighting on behalf of the world and its creatures.

2. "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

The very next verse of the 1 John passage reiterates the message which was present in the very first text we examined, 2 Cor. 5:19. God takes the initiative in love—he comes to us, not we to him. And the next step is there, too, "If anyone says 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." One of the many analogs in our history is the collective peace initiative in the political arena. Allen Geyer points to the call by the 1981 World Council of Churches international public hearings on nuclear weapons and disarmament, held in Amsterdam, for "independent non-negotiated actions" which "invite a corresponding response, but which do not have to depend on the uncertainties of protracted negotiation." (See Geyer's *Theology and Ultimate Violence: A New Nuclear Agenda for the Churches*. Shalom Paper #12, Washington: The Church's Center for Theology and Public Policy, May, 1982, p. 7.) President

1. From E. & E. Hubermen, eds., *War: An Anthology*. New York: Pocket Books, 1969; p.i.

Nixon's unilateral moratorium on chemical weapons was one such case. In spite of the fact that there may have been more strategic and practical reasons for this action than we the public knew about, it was widely perceived as an initiative for peace, and so it was. Let's think first love, not first strike. How about unilaterally calling off the MX missile? Must everything be a bargaining chip? They have a better chance to love us if we love them first.

3. "Thou shalt not kill" (Exod. 20:13).

Students of the Bible soon learn that "kill" in the sixth commandment is not the general Hebrew term *mot*, but the specialized term *rasah*, "murder." In its own context, the commandment was not aimed at socially acceptable forms of killing, like war, capital punishment, and revenge, but simply at murder. However, it is one of the Ten Commandments, those bottom-line laws, those categorical imperatives. These ten are identified by Israel as the laws which must be observed by all if Israelite society is to exist at all.

If our society is to exist at all, we cannot engage in nuclear exchanges. If we are to achieve for our society what Israel achieved for its society, our sixth commandment is going to have to mean more than it meant. It is going to have to mean "Thou shalt not kill, and that includes fighting nuclear wars." That is what I call a functional analogy. Only by saying more than Israel did can the commandment function for us the way it did for them!

4. "Putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another" (Eph. 4:25).

The writer of Ephesians was giving moral instruction to the Christian fellowship, but truth and peace have kissed each other forever; lying threatens the harmony of all communities ranging from the community of woman and man all the way to the community of nations. One counterpart to this prototypical biblical principle about truth lies in our response to nuclear doctrine. Let's tell the truth, encouraged by Ephesians. To argue the need for nuclear superiority rather than nuclear parity is to lie; to claim that the policy of mutually assured destruction is a peacekeeping policy is to lie; to claim there is an essential linkage between a Soviet brigade in Cuba and the refusal to ratify SALT II is to lie; to say "better dead than red" is to lie; to say that we must escalate arms production in order to control and reduce arms is to lie. The world is more complex now than it was in New Testament times. Of course we will need to make proximate arrangements with our Soviet neighbors, interim security agreements, comprehensive solutions as we inch slowly and painfully away from the crumbling precipice on which we now stand. But woe be to us if we lose our moral compass and lie! Here is the truth which we must openly tell our neighbors here and abroad. Our goal is not simply to get everyone's fingers off the red button; it is to get rid of the red button itself.

5. "He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide for strong nations afar off;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall sit every man under his vine and his fig tree,
and none shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken"

(Micah 4:3-4).

The text means essentially what it meant—a reordering of priorities lies ahead. In ancient times this meant beating swords into plowshares. In modern times the analogous reordering of priorities is pretty direct. It might mean beating a B-1 bomber into tractors, or a fragmentation bomb into piccolos. Our priorities have gotten sadly out of line. The September 1982 edition of *Parade* magazine carried the following news item: "*Thirty-eight million dollars an hour*. President Reagan's proposed military budget will cost American taxpayers more than thirty-eight million *an hour* over the next five years—and that's only if we remain at peace. Should war break out, the cost undoubtedly will be higher." The five-year total "adds up to about 1.675 trillion dollars. If you're wondering what your share is, it works out to more than twenty thousand dollars for every taxpayer in the U.S. . . ."

Social justice is a high Christian priority. Yet it gets bumped way down when—even if there is no exorbitantly costly war—we spend so much on preventing war that we de-stabilize the very countries we seek to protect, including our own. As Allen Geyer points out (*op. cit.*, p. 8), "One half of one percent of one year's world military expenditure would pay for all the farm equipment needed to increase food production to the level of self-sufficiency in the world's food deficit countries by 1990." This text summons us by analogy to a reordering of priorities.

6. "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, by keeping his commandments . . . then you shall live and multiply . . . But if your heart turns away . . . I declare to you this day that you shall perish. . . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Deut. 30:15-19).

The prophets who wrote the book of Deuteronomy had the gall to say that national security was rooted in obedience to the commandments of God. The claim may have sounded like wishful thinking even then in a time when Israel sought military alliances with Egypt to shore up its tattered defenses against the rising threat of the neo-Babylonian empire. In the political world in which we actually live, concepts like trust in the sovereignty of God and salvation through obedience to God's law can sound downright vacuous. Do you mean to tell us that we can face off against Soviet or Cuban or God knows what missiles with nothing in our hands except righteous obedience? The answer suggested by the biblical analogy ultimately is, yes. It goes like this: Obedience to *torah* means standing in a network of just and caring relationships between God and people and between people and people. It inevitably means love of neighbor expressed in obedient acts of healing, compassion, and peace. Obedience means

attention to matters of justice, a fair shake for the widow and the poor. Obedience to the law of God, and its fruits, love of neighbor, attention to matters of justice, surely do not lead us to construct magnificent arsenals of death, but toward the dismantling of the walls that separate us. In short, national security is served best of all by national obedience to a righteous God who leads us into healed and whole relationships.

7. "In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage'" (Isa. 19:24-25).

Here is a text which de-demonizes the enemy. One wonders at the scandal the prophet caused by reporting Yahweh's attitude toward feared Assyria—"the work of my hands"—and toward hated Egypt—"my people." Jesus, too, scandalized his own age by talking with the woman at the well, and here she was the Samaritan enemy, the great Satan! In her article in the special peace issue of *Church and Society* (November/December 1980-January/February 1981), Esther C. Stine makes a strong case for de-demonizing the enemy in our own time and in our own way (see her article "'Would That Even Today You Knew the Things That Make for Peace,'" pp. 24-30). As long as the enemy remains a faceless, sub-human cipher, or evil incarnate, it is relatively easy to work up hatred adequate to kill that enemy. On the other hand, as Stine says, "an enemy who is like us ceases to be an enemy." Technology dehumanizes the enemy by sanitizing war. The enemy becomes a mere green blip on a monitor passing in between the cross-hairs. And even religion can contribute to the demonization of the enemy. This is one of the greatest single negative aspects of the revived biblical literalism which is sweeping our land. When you claim that you can find in scripture texts that predict an attack on Israel by Russians in league not only with Arab allies but with satanic forces as well (see Hal Lindsey's treatment of God and Magog in Ezekiel 38:1-5), you are inviting people into the ranks of fanaticism. They begin to believe that they are fighting real demons in a war of the sons of light against the sons of darkness. But the truth is that scripture does not invite us to demonize the enemy; our twentieth-century analog to Jesus' conversations with the woman at the well and the Roman centurion is to enter into combat with the popular lies that the Russians will never bargain in good faith, will never make meaningful concessions, and will violate all treaties. The truth is that the Russians are not all bad and that they are as afraid of nuclear disaster as we are.

8. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Too often this text has been related to notions of valor, laying down our lives in war against our brothers and sisters for the sake of our country, our way of life, our turf. But the international and intercultural ethos in which we now live has rendered those old notions of valor considerably obsolete. Who will really buy the idea, "greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for the oil of the Persian Gulf"? Do you still want to talk about valor? Okay, here

is valor in our time: working together on equal footing with Asians and Africans and Russians to eliminate racism and economic exploitation and war. In the nuclear age valor has nothing to do with the announcement that one is prepared to offer up the lives of fellow citizens in order to save them from godless Communism, because one is talking about hundreds of millions of fellow citizens, about all their cultural triumphs and riches with them, and about all the generations yet unborn which sleep in their sperm and their eggs. Charge up San Juan Hill over nuclear landmines? "Nuke 'em till they glow"? That's not valor, that's terminal folly! Valor lies not in pressing red buttons, but in shaking hands and taking hold of the scalpel and the plow. One of those memorable poets of World War I, Wilfred Owen, already saw this in his moving poem, "*Dulce et decorum est*" (the Latin sentence from Horace with which the poem ends, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, means "sweet and proper it is to die for the fatherland.")

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.—

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs.

Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

So the analog to this prototypical biblical teaching, "greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," is surely this: Greater love hath no man than to go to the mat on behalf of people everywhere, that

they may be freed of the scourge of the nukes and all of the scourges leading up to them.

9. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6).

The futuristic texts of the Bible are full of oracles like this famous one. In the best of all possible worlds which lies ahead, the writers of both the Old Testament and the New Testament primarily hoped for peace. It is a dynamic peace, not mere entropy; it is a peace of fruitfulness and joy in which children don't just sit, but play, in which creatures live and move, in which knowledge of God pounds like the surf of the sea. For the life of me I cannot see how texts like this one, or Isaiah 65, or Daniel, or Revelation, can encourage anyone in our time to become passive and quiet. True, these texts make clear that we do not build the new Jerusalem with our own hands, and that only God will bring it in. What does the vision of the peaceable kingdom that lies ahead encourage us to do? Why, it encourages us to live peaceably now in order to give a foretaste of that coming age. And that is where the analogs will emerge abundantly in our own living out of our own interim ethic.

God grant us that our study of the biblical bases for peace will lead us, as individuals and as communities, toward the kind of lives that will so shine forth in advance the peace that characterizes the age to come that people can point to us and say, "Look, there is what life is like in the kingdom of heaven."