
The Family that Love Built: A Call for Biblical Peacemaking

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In the summer of 2015, a group of 250 heavily armed residents of Phoenix planned a provocative protest outside a local mosque.

A counter demonstration was also planned, and the threat of violence was real. With less than 24 hours' notice, 150 Christians from several area churches decided to show up and form a peaceful line between the protesters and the mosque in what they called the "Love Your Neighbor Rally."

One of the leaders of this rally was Pastor Jim Mullins who said: "We wanted to demonstrate the pattern of the cross—being compelled by the love of Christ to put ourselves in harm's way for the sake of the other (Phil 2:6-11, Col. 1:24)."

Allow me to read to you from the account of a friend of Jim's:

"The night before the protest, Jim shared a meal with the president of the mosque, asking how Christians could help keep the peace in a protest expected to spark violence. The president said he welcomed the Church at the mosque as a presence of peace; he suggested quietly standing on the sidewalk between the mosque and protesters.

"Opposite the protesters and intermixed with people of various faiths and none, Christians stood quietly and confidently, holding signs with Bible verses, praying aloud, handing water to people on both sides of the police line, and engaging in calm discussion about the presence of Islam in their community.

"On the hottest day of the year in the desert, tempers ran high and the potential for violence was real, but self governance, the capable Phoenix Police Department, the steady presence of the Church and the omnipotent grace of God made for an event that ended quietly."

“By the end of the night, there wasn’t one shot fired, one punch thrown, or one single arrest,” says Jim. “We called on the Prince of Peace for the welfare of the city (Jer. 29:7), and he heard our prayers.”

Peacemakers disrupt the broken ways of fear and violence and anger and revenge. And as they do this they not only reveal themselves as true disciples of Jesus the Messiah and agents of his kingdom, but they also serve as signposts for the day in which heaven and earth are one and God is fully in control.

I begin with that story to remind us that peacemaking is not just for those who like rainbows and unicorns and bad poetry.

Actually, because you’re reading this, you probably already know that peacemaking is much harder, much grittier than what we often think of when people say the word peace. And it’s also really needed right now.

Our culture and our politics seem consumed by anger and fear, contempt and condescension. Our leaders often are only reflecting **us** when they use dehumanizing language to demonize their opponents. Grace and charity are in too short supply, and those committed to lives of peace and reconciliation just seem absent from the public square.

If only there was a community of reconciled people who are in turn called to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world, they’d surely have something to offer...

That sounds a lot like the church. Or at least what the church is supposed to be.

I believe the era we’re living in needs more peacemakers, and I believe there is no community with a clearer mandate to take up this call than the church of Jesus Christ. A reconciled people called to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

Any community that embraces a posture of peacemaking would be countercultural in any place and time, but that’s of course particularly true today. And while the church of Jesus Christ is always called to be a countercultural community, sadly, in

many ways, Christians in America today are often known to non-Christians for being fueled by fear and anger and formed by the cultural forces of division.

My argument is that peacemaking is the most neglected aspect of Christian discipleship, but in today's society, it may be the most important.

You see, when we as the church want to talk about how to live the countercultural life of the peacemaker, we are opening ourselves up to a journey of personal transformation. And a people transformed by the love and grace and mercy of God can join him in the healing and transforming work of his kingdom in the world.

The world's a mess. But we believe Jesus came to make all things right, to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. He's rejoining heaven and earth, and he invites us to participate with him in that project.

At Telos—where our mission is to form communities of peacemakers to bring healing to intractable conflict at home and abroad—our main program is a Peacemakers Pilgrimage to the Holy Land where we not only walk where Jesus walked 2000 years ago, but we also try to walk where Jesus might walk today. We meet the modern residents of the land, learning about the decades old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. We share meals with people from a variety of perspectives, listen to stories, lean in to the messiness of an unresolved conflict, and learn from those doing the work of coexistence, conflict resolution, and reconciliation.

And we remember that every person there, whether they're Arab or Israeli, Jewish, Christian or Muslim, is made in the image of God.

People often ask me if I'm optimistic about peace in the Middle East. Let me be clear that I am not. In a long running conflict like this one, the pessimists have all the facts. But I do believe that peace, even in the Middle East, is possible. When you engage in the work of peacemaking, you decline to plot yourself on the scale between optimism and pessimism.

I choose instead the spectrum of hope vs. despair, and as a follower of Jesus I choose hope, because we have a hope in Him, an eschatological hope. We serve a God who has made all things right and is making all things new. A Palestinian Christian pastor told me something years ago that's shaped the way I think: Hope is

not the same thing as optimism; it's not a feeling or an emotion. Hope is what you do. You live and act in hopeful ways to open the possibility for transformation. Hope is the superpower of the peacemaker.

So if we want to talk about peacemaking from a Christian perspective, we need to define a few terms.

Peace is a word that needs rescuing from the unserious thing many of us think it is. It's a lot more than the slogans on feel-good bumper stickers you may see on the back of Priuses or tie-dye t-shirts. Some of our notions of peace and love are naïve to the presence of evil in the world and in the human heart.

At the same time, peace is often misunderstood by the powerful and privileged, who often confuse peace with quiet. People in power always want peace as long as it doesn't cost them anything.

But as Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of justice." That's a particularly profound insight that begins to show us what peace really is.

The word we translate as peace is of course the Hebrew word **shalom**. Shalom is an ancient biblical concept so rich and profound that it defies simple definition. We translate it as peace but our notion of peace is often the palest approximation of shalom in its fullness. We reduce its meaning to an internal and personal sense of well-being or to a lack of communal or global conflict. Shalom is both these things, but the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It is vastly more than the absence of conflict or internal turmoil. Shalom is a state of "wholeness," a web of relationships that results in flourishing, peace, and justice.

Here's the best definition I've come across:

"Shalom is the ordering of all things in which men and women live in right relationship with God, with each other, and with creation in societies of flourishing and justice and peace."

Seen in this light, the shattering of shalom that happened with Adam and Eve in the Garden is what theologians call sin. As Neil Plantinga has said: "Sin is disruption of created harmony and then resistance to divine restoration of that harmony... God

hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be.”

If the story of the Bible is one of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration, we know that the perfect shalom of God’s design was there in the beginning but was shattered at the Fall. And boy do we feel the weight of that. When we experience the pain and brokenness of the world, we feel it. Cancer, car accidents, personal betrayals, violence, insecurity, injustice, racism, war, oppression—all are part of the human experience and painful reminders of the fallen nature of the world we live in. But sometimes in quiet moments we often know somewhere deep inside that this is not how things were meant to be. We are a people and a world in need of rescue and in need of the restoration of shalom.

My wife and I have four kids and two of them are boys who are only 20 months apart. They love each other and when they were young they were inseparable, almost a single unit. But there was a time in the middle years when they began to have what we called their ‘Cain and Abel moments’. On some level what we wanted was just for them to always get along. But as the parents who love them-- even imperfectly-- on a deeper level what we really longed for was not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of shalom. We wanted them to be grounded in a right relationship with God and with each other. We wanted the absence of conflict to come from a place of respect and mutuality, an understanding that they’re in this together and each is responsible for the other.

Applied in society, this is what Dr King called the creation of “the beloved community.” We can’t work for or demand flourishing and justice for our family or our tribe or even our country without taking into account our neighbors need for those same things. And to Jesus, even if our neighbor is also our enemy, this remains true.

We look back on the civil rights struggle of Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many others and we laud the power of nonviolence. But the real heart of the civil rights movement wasn’t nonviolence as much it was enemy love. King sought to liberate African Americans from the chains of Jim Crow segregation but he also sought to liberate white Americans from the corrosive force of white supremacy.

Mother Theresa put it like this: “if we have no peace it is because we’ve forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Our family often spends the Christmas holiday in Arkansas with my parents in the house I grew up in, and each year we give my dad a jigsaw puzzle as a Christmas gift.

Somewhere in a factory, complicated pictures are pressed on to cardboard and then a specialized machine fractures a coherent scene into 1000 unique pieces. Once these pieces are scrambled inside a box it’s no quick and easy thing to return them to their original order. And the greatest tool for restoring “wholeness”? It is of course the image of the original picture on the box. When we can see what the artist had in mind, we can then begin to identify what we have to do to restore it. This vision of the big coherent thing you’re working toward is what the Greeks called your *telos*. Without this vision, without a proper telos, the task of working a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle is frustrating, pointless, or just mindlessly boring, but when you can see the big picture you can begin the work of restoration with direction and purpose.

An understanding of God’s original vision is essential to understanding what the work of peacemaking looks like and how we do it. So we begin, as with the creation order, with God’s original design for wholeness.

The importance of this beginning point becomes apparent when we see the outworking of theologies that skip over the Creation story of Genesis 1 and 2 and begin with Adam and Eve’s fateful choice in Genesis 3. The history of human kind, littered as it is with violence, abuse of power, oppression, and selfish pride, is testament to the enduring truth of the Fall. The pessimists tend to have all the facts.

But to begin the story with the Fall, as too many Christians have done, results in a failure to appreciate the grander story of God’s original intention and of his plan to make all things new.

This project for the restoration of shalom was foretold throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact the overarching story of the Bible after the Fall is one of God’s desire to restore that which was lost by calling a people unto Himself through which he would ultimately bring universal blessing.

The prophets were on occasion given glimpses of this vision, of a world restored and made new, and often translated these divine revelations in poetic language. Isaiah tells us we will beat our swords into ploughshares, the wolf will live with the lamb, and there will be no more war.

After being tempted in the wilderness, Jesus returns to Nazareth and speaks in his hometown synagogue. There he read from the Torah scroll a portion from the book of Isaiah.

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,”

And amidst this gathering of family and neighbors who'd known him all his life, in a tiny village of only a few hundred people in a remote corner of the Roman Empire, Jesus identified himself as the agent of this new kingdom, a world in which God is in charge, the wounded are healed, the weak are defended, and the captive are freed. And this liberation and salvation is open to all humankind. **This** is good news. Shalom is being restored.

The Gospel writer John tells us that Jesus came to make the Word flesh. Because words without incarnation are just words. And he announced that God's kingdom has come, though, in one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith, not fully. We can't yet disband our police forces and our armies and unlock our doors. And we can't leave the wolf alone with the lamb just yet. But make no mistake, even in its own “now but not yet” way, his kingdom has come. As C.S. Lewis said, “Aslan is on the move.”

But there's more: Jesus didn't just announce his kingdom; he then did the amazing thing of calling us to join him in the project. The rescue operation is underway and we are a part of a rebel force led by the king of heaven Himself.

This is a beautiful and weighty thing when you think about it. The God who made us and who made the world desires us to flourish, to love him and each other, to build and create for the common good, to pursue justice and peace, to show mercy and compassion. To care for the poor and the powerless, to defend the weak, the widow and the orphan. We are to be re-newers and rebuilders in broken places, healers, reconcilers, people who practice forgiveness and who love their enemies.

In short we who follow Jesus are signposts of a different reality, pushing back against the prevailing wisdom in every place and time, joining him in the work of shalom-making.

In fact, Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that the peacemakers will be called “children of God.” I’ve thought for a long time about what that means, and here’s the best I’ve come up with:

I think of my own four children, and how much I love them, and what a strange thing it is to combine two genetic and family histories into the creation of a unique person, made in God’s image, but with character traits and physical features and predispositions from parents and grandparents and the legacy of family choices and dynamics. It’s quite a complex and amazing thing. And sometimes when one of them does or says something, or just looks a certain way or laughs at a particular kind of joke, I recognize a bit of myself in them, and I think, “Yes, that is my child. There’s no denying it.” Perhaps that’s one way of seeing what God meant when he said that those who seek to make peace, to restore shalom, to bring the fractured shards back to wholeness—those are my children because they are the ones who act most like me. It’s not that he doesn’t love us when we’re not peacemakers, but when we act in this way he recognizes his own character in us.

In our work with Israelis and Palestinians we learn about many things that peacemakers do. For example:

- They take courageous steps towards those they could consider their ‘enemy’
- They listen to understand
- They pursue justice
- They disrupt cycles of violence and revenge
- They are able to hold two truths in tension. As the Danish physicist Neils Bohr said: “The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.”

My Deatherage forebears arrived in Culpepper, Virginia in the early 1700s, and their descendants were mostly poor farmers and timber workers with a few scoundrels thrown in. We had our own experience as transplanted Englishmen who lived a lot of the American story.

I can venture with some certainty that there were also Africans who were brought (involuntarily) to Culpepper County the same year the Deatherages arrived, but as enslaved people with no prospects for any life other than one of subjugation and cruelty for themselves and their children. Any descendants of the Africans of Culpepper County also have a long experience of the American story but theirs will sound starkly different from mine. And both will be true. Given the early ascendancy of white supremacy, white and black Americans each have a widely different experience of the same history.

Some grow concerned we're dabbling in relativism, devaluing truth when we embrace the idea that we can hold two different and often contradictory stories at the same time. But the truth is often a bigger thing that we can easily get our arms around. And often opening ourselves up to more than one story is the only way to begin to see it.

So much of what I've learned about the importance of listening to understand and the central role of forgiveness and reconciliation has come from Israeli and Palestinian friends...

Robi Damelin is a Jewish Israeli mother whose son David was killed by a Palestinian sniper while serving in the Israeli military in the West Bank. When the dreaded knock on her door came one night with three Israeli soldiers there to tell her that her son had been killed, the first thing Robi said was "you may not kill anyone in the name of my child." Her rejection of revenge, and her willingness to disrupt the cycle of conflict, to jam something in its gears, was but the first step in a life devoted these past 17 years to the work of reconciliation. Within the first few months of her new reality, she joined a group of what today is over 600 Israeli and Palestinian families who have each chosen the difficult path of reconciliation.

One of Robi's dear friends is a man named Bassam Aramin. Bassam is a Palestinian Muslim, and as a young man he saw himself as a fighter for his homeland and spent seven years in an Israeli prison. While he was there he was shown a film

about the holocaust, a story he knew very little about, and as he watched it he was moved to tears. Through a series of events, a transformation began in him that—after his release from prison—led him to co-found an organization called Combatants for Peace: a group of ex-Palestinian fighters and ex-Israeli soldiers who came together to wage peace. After all of this, on a January day in 2007, Bassam’s 10-year old daughter Abir was shot in the head; a rubber bullet fired by an Israeli border policeman outside her school in Jerusalem. As she lingered in the hospital two days before she died, Bassam and his family were surrounded not just by their Palestinian Muslim neighbors and friends, but by their Jewish friends too. And following Abir’s death, Bassam chose to devote his life and work to the mission of the Parents Circle, to redouble his efforts to get to know the “other” and to be an emissary for reconciliation.

One more story.

On a hot June night in 2015, twelve African American Christians met for midweek Bible study in the historic Emanuel Church in Charleston, SC. They were joined by a white young man who they welcomed into their midst. At the end of the service, around 9pm, this same young man took out a gun and opened fire. Nine people died.

The perpetrator of this massacre, this act of terrorism, made no secret of his desire to provoke a race war in America. And yet, Charleston didn’t go up in flames. The assailant was arrested the next day, and less than 48 hours after the attack, families of the victims were unexpectedly given the opportunity to address the man who killed their loved ones, and they left the nation and the world in disbelief as they extended forgiveness.

There was nothing cheap about what they did. And not all the families could get so quickly to a place of forgiveness. But this disruptive act, this rejection of revenge, opened up a new path. Less than a month later, the Confederate flag, that for 54 years had flown defiantly over the South Carolina State Capitol, was brought down with broad, bipartisan support, and other monuments to white supremacy began to be questioned and even come down in places like Baltimore and New Orleans.

The sister of Depayne Middleton-Doctor, one of the victims of the Charleston shooting, said, “For me, I’m a work in progress. I acknowledge that I am very angry. But one thing that [my sister] always enjoined in our family... is she taught me that

we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive.”

Friends, we are a family that love built. We have no room for hating. We are a people who believe that the God who made us all has not forsaken us in the mess we’ve made. But in his great love for us he came to us, became one of us, healed our afflictions, laid down life and privilege and power and dignity for our sake, endured humiliation and shame and separation and darkness, all to reconcile us to God and to each other. We are a family that love built. And we are called to join Jesus as his ambassadors of healing and reconciliation in a culture of hurting and division and violence. We are called to be peacemakers.