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What Can The Bible Teach Us About Peacemaking?

(Originally presented at the [Quaker Peace Roundtable 2001](#))

Ron Mock

I. Introduction

I have been asked to bring to the 2001 Quaker Peace Roundtable a reflection on what the Bible teaches about peacemaking. I accepted the task with some reservations.

For one thing, among the peace churches (at least) the subject has gotten a little stale. In fact, it is one of the oldest and driest in all of Christendom. Haven't we heard all this many times already? The topic threatens to instantly lose its audience. I might not attend a concurrent session on it if I had any decent alternatives. After 15 years of university teaching, I have already had my share of talking to people who are reading for another class, chatting with their neighbors, or even sleeping soundly with heads down on desks. I can't bear the thought of traveling all the way across the continent to face any more of that.

But for an ecumenical group of Quakers, coming up with something new is not the only hurdle. A large part of the possible audience may have trouble finding anything relevant in the topic. If the Bible is not authoritative, as many Friends hold, its teachings are at best of advisory value, and at worst of quaintly historical interest. Some of my audience may listen to what I have to say in about the same spirit as they would bring to a visit to an antique store: the artifacts brought to light may have nostalgic, historic, or anthropologic value. But in our modern homes, rational, simple, humane and bright with the modern (or postmodern) Light, who is going to tolerate clutter from a bygone era?

So much of my audience may find itself arrayed along a rather dismal continuum, from those who think my topic is stale to those who think it's positively petrified.

I propose to address these hurdles one at a time, by dividing the topic into its two constituent parts. First we will explore the question "What Can The Bible Teach Us. . .?" Then we will reflect on what we mean when we talk "About Peacemaking."

II. Operating Assumptions for a Life-Changing Encounter with Scripture

If we approach it with a couple of operating assumptions, the Bible can draw us into a eye-

opening encounter with the Word of God, and teach us things about peacemaking (among many other things) that we would never have seen coming. So I start by suggesting that we adopt two operating assumptions, at least for the moment, in considering the Bible's teachings on peacemaking.

A. First Assumption: The Bible is one document, and its teachings cohere.

I admit that I have a professional advantage in making such an operating assumption. I am a lawyer by training, and some would say by temperament as well. Although I sometimes detect a puzzling note of disparagement when they say this. Lawyers, at least in common law traditions like our own, have to approach the judicial decisions of their jurisdiction – a body of writing much larger and more diverse than the Bible – with precisely this assumption. Under the common law, the most important source for understanding the law is not the code of statutes enacted by legislatures, nor the regulations adopted by administrative agencies, nor even the Constitution. Commentaries and encyclopedias are of only modest help. The heart of the law is found in the cases decided by appellate courts.

So the lawyer must read cases. That is, she must read stories about real events that have happened to real people, as told by judges writing appellate opinions. And then she has to read the judges' opinions about what those stories mean, and their orders about what shall be done to or for the people in the stories as a result. And she has to decipher from these stories and opinions what the law is so she can tell her client the probable implications of whatever alternatives he is considering.

The lawyer can only understand the law by reading a good sample of cases. And she has to read those cases, at least for starters, as if they together are all teaching her a single coherent lesson about what the law is. Only with that assumption as her operating guide can she distill from all those stories the common threads that constitute the fabric of the law. If she begins to say to herself, "Well, this case is by Douglas who was a liberal, but that case is by Rehnquist who is conservative, so they could very well disagree," she may very well be right about Douglas and Rehnquist, but she is likely to misunderstand the law. This is because the law is under the influence of both Douglas and Rehnquist. It may not strictly be true that the law exists somewhere "out there" independent of humans and waiting to be discovered and described by them. But a good lawyer can help herself toward understanding the law by operating **as if** the law is an independent reality, and can best be located by plotting its position from the clues given us by Rehnquist AND Douglas (and every other appellate judge as well).

If every judge agreed on how to understand the law, lawyering would be a craft, but not a

very interesting one. We could just as well list the laws somewhere on the web and then all look them up as needed. If we ever achieved such a systematic and reductionist rendering of the law, it would probably be a sign of the moral collapse of our civilization. That legal system would be dead, unable to flex with the times or learn about its own injustices.

Fortunately, there are tensions among the cases; they are never quite identical. And those cases are crucial, because they give the law its ability to change, or even just to clarify itself in the light of new developments. And yet the lawyer can do a pretty good job of describing to her client what the law is, what the strand of consistency is right now among all those hundreds or thousands of variegated cases. She can do this only if she starts with the operating assumption that all those cases are, in a way, a single body of writing, and that underneath the surface variations there runs a coherent and consistent teaching.

I suggest that we treat the Bible as a casebook. It is a collection of stories (and other literary forms, akin to commentaries and opinions) assembled to teach us about how to relate to God and each other. The various pieces of the Bible present to us, quite often, significant tensions between one another. We could treat these as contradictions and throw out the pieces that seem weakest. Or we could avoid a lot of work by seizing on one passage and ignoring others. But if we do either of these, we risk losing a good portion of what the Bible can teach us. We remove ourselves from the creative tensions in the Bible, and its instructive value evaporates.

B. Second Assumption: the Bible is authoritative.

But tolerating ambiguity in the Bible and valuing it as a source of creative and instructive tension, isn't good enough by itself. We also need to approach the Bible with a second working assumption: that the Bible is authoritative. If we consider the Bible as having no claim on us, then its instruction and the creative tension that gives it life have no hold over us. The Bible becomes mere literature when it loses its claim of authority over us. Literature might help us understand how someone else views an issue, but it has only weak influence over its readers' lives. We are free to dismiss literature as mistaken or worse whenever it confronts us with a challenge to our way of thinking or living.

All of us find passages in the Bible that are hard to swallow. Some might even seem a little embarrassing. The temptation is to dismiss them. Some do require us to take into account factors that are no longer present. We may be free to eat ham, for example, partly because refrigeration and animal husbandry have reduced the risk of trichinosis. (Of course, Christian freedom to eat ham also has Scriptural support in the book of Acts, in the story of

Peter's vision of various kinds of formerly forbidden food.) But if we take the Bible as a single coherent document, and as authoritative, even when we conclude that a particular standard is time- or culture-specific (and thus not literally applicable to us), we still must dig down to find the reason for the rule. We need to understand the underlying principle that motivated the standard in the first place, and that carries down to us today.

Hardly anyone practices animal sacrifice anymore, including the vast majority of Jews and Christians. We have concluded that the instructions to slaughter animals for our sins no longer govern. For Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus makes animal sacrifice redundant. I don't know for sure why Jews no longer sacrifice; I presume it has something to do with the destruction of the Temple. But even though the practice is gone, the reason for animal sacrifice presumably lingers. We still need to express repentance, even sacrificially, and seek forgiveness for sin. We still need to recognize the potentially fatal costs of our wrongdoing, to ourselves, and to others, including the most innocent and blameless around us.

If we just dismiss animal sacrifice as an awkward, cruel, and outdated practice, and excise that part of the Bible from our minds, we miss a good part of the lesson the Bible can teach us. But if we keep the awkward parts, and give them authority over us, forcing ourselves to remain in dialog with them then we give the Bible its full power to change us in ways we could not have anticipated. And, of course, those are generally the ways we most need changing.

If, on the other hand, we pick and choose what seems comfortable to us, we are not asking what the Bible teaches, but rather "what am I willing to be taught?" This often mutates into "where does the Bible agree with the opinions I had before I consulted it?" This reading of Scripture is a sure way to insulate ourselves from the Light, by assuming the Light can't really be anything too inconvenient to our current mode of living.

In suggesting these two operating assumptions for reading the Bible, I am drawing on my own experience. Part of this is my own devotional experience with Scripture. There are several areas of my life where a Biblical text first woke me to the possibility of being a better person. The whole idea of loving one's enemies, so prominent in what will follow in this paper, comes from almost no other source in my life.

But even more powerful is the way the Bible interacts with the rest of my life to form a creative, instructive dialog. For example, I first heard of stewardship while being taught what the Bible says about it. Then in law school I studied the duties of a fiduciary, one who acts for another. On my next encounter with the Biblical teachings on stewardship, I

quickly saw both the Bible's teachings and my law school studies in a new light. Suddenly stewardship changed from one-dimensional notions of tithing to a life-filling understanding of what it really means to see ourselves as not owning anything, but being in every aspect of our lives stewards for God and for those around us God would have us serve. This richer understanding, arising out of the interplay of an authoritative Bible with other sources of God's Light, has proven to be exceptionally fertile ground for helping me deal with everything from my relationship to others to the possibility of being greedy for nonmaterial things.

So I am inviting you to reflect on the Bible's teachings with these two assumptions in mind: the unity of the Bible's teachings, and their authority. Perhaps for you these will only be provisional assumptions for the purpose of this study, and you will abandon them for the rest of your life. Even that will be much better than nothing.

And I really cannot ask more of you, anyway. For we can also safely make a third assumption: I am a flawed Biblical interpreter. I have tried to avoid obvious errors, but I doubt that I have achieved this goal, despite my best efforts. So while I urge you to treat the Bible as authoritative when seeking its teachings on a topic, I cannot urge you to treat my little study with this kind of deference. Consider it a first draft, and make out of it your own, better one.

III. What Is Peacemaking?

Having suggested an approach to the first part of our thematic question B the Bible B we now have to consider what we mean by "peacemaking."

Through most of their history, the peace churches have built their peace testimony around the issues of war and military service. Peacemaking has been primarily pacifism. That is, the Quaker peace testimony has always featured a refusal to kill.

For early Christian pacifists, as well as Anabaptists and Quakers who revived Christian pacifism, the refusal to kill came into boldest relief when the societies around them were moving to war. Under intense pressures to match the sacrifice and risk of the soldiers in neighbors' families, Christian pacifists needed a strong mooring point to keep from floating with the insistent tide of national feeling. While many came to pacifism, I suppose, through individual discernment of God's voice, the New Testament was crucial to most.

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 though 7) and its parallels might

be the best example of a Biblical text that helps hold pacifists to their position. When called upon to join the national effort to kill enemies, the Christian pacifist who doesn't make a habit of dodging inconvenient Biblical passages finds himself with no choice but to refuse to kill. Jesus goes to great lengths to make clear that the Christian ethic is in sharp contrast to the wisdom of the world:

"You have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'; but I say to you 'Resist not the evil one'. . . You have heard it said, 'Love you neighbor and hate your enemy'; but I say to you, 'Love your enemies. . .'" (Matt. 5:38- 44)

Jesus has much more to say about this, of course, and so does the rest of the Bible, New Testament and Old. Many have explored these passages with care, and have done better than I can to explain their meaning to us. I recommend that you consult them for their careful analysis, which is mostly beyond the scope of this presentation.¹

Insofar as the Christian peace testimony is pacifist, it speaks to one very simple concern: the evil of warfare and related forms of killing. Biblical pacifism comes in a variety of flavors, but they all share this commonality: we cannot kill an enemy we are commanded to love. Pacifism in its most basic form focuses on the exercise of lethal coercion.

I do not want to minimize the importance of this concern. Wars are evil, in perhaps the most concentrated form devised by humans. For much of human history war may have had competition for the title "monarch of human evils." Slavery, imperial domination, racism, sexism B there are some impressive competitors. But the twentieth century's rapid technological progress had an uneven effect on human evil. Slavery was already on the way out. One could argue that technology has done as much to undermine racism and sexism as it has to enhance them. Technology may be elevating some new evils B perhaps connected to genetic engineering B and nourished some old ones, especially materialism and pornography. But until we know more about the future of some of these renewed competitors, we can say with confidence that the exploding lethality of violence constitutes the worst single effect of modern technology.

And yet I must point out that classic pacifism, with its focus on lethal violence, is at best only a partial peacemaking ethic. Pacifism has two striking limitations. First, it is easiest to formulate in a negative sense B against killing. Sometimes Biblical believers have stopped there. A hundred years ago, for example, most Mennonites might have defined their pacifism almost entirely in terms of "nonresistance," drawing on the language of Matthew 5:39 ("resist not the evil one").

Quaker quietists might follow a similar pattern.

But pacifism as mostly a protest against violence leaves pacifists awkwardly equipped when peacemaking is needed. Mennonites who knew their peacemaking as primarily nonresistance found themselves in a difficult spot in World War I when asked to explain to their neighbors why they would not join in the sacrifice and risk of "making the world safe for democracy."² Negative pacifism reduces to mere passivism, as if the Christian command was "avoid your enemies" or "try not to bother your enemies" instead of "love your enemies." Love implies being drawn toward one's enemy, concerned for her needs and welfare. Pacifism needs to include an active program of meeting enemy needs before it can be called "love."

The second limitation in classic pacifism is its narrow focus on only one of Kenneth Boulding's three faces of power³. Pacifism addresses coercion, the threat "do what I want or I will do what you don't want."⁴ And classic pacifism only addresses one aspect of the coercive realm in human relations: lethal violence. Coercion includes non-lethal threats to impose one's will on another, but classic pacifists may not care. Technically, a pacifist might be satisfied if rulers (to borrow Tacitus' classic phrase) "make a desert and call it peace" as long as the desert was made without killing anyone.

Classic pacifism, then, focuses on "negative peace," the absence of deadly violence. We can call this "irenic peace" to resonate with the meaning of the Greek word used in some New Testament passages. But the Bible also includes references to the Hebrew word "shalom," which means much more than just the absence of violence. Shalom also includes some positive elements, particularly justice and right relationships. We can call the cessation of war "peacemaking" because it truly is an improvement. But to reach the fullest Biblical vision of peace, the "shalomist peace," we have to go beyond tranquillity to harmony.

Classic pacifism's focus on the coercive face of power also cuts another direction. Except for the rare event of a lethal personal attack B troubling to pacifists even though they are so rareB the bulk of deadly coercion is conducted by governments. In fact, political scientists consider a monopoly on the legitimate exercise of lethal force to be one of the classic hallmarks of a state or government. When states attempt lethal coercion upon each other, we call it "war"; when they do it against elements within their boundaries, we call it either "police action" or "revolution."

If we think of politics (rather narrowly) as the contest for influence over governments and the policies they will follow, we can give pacifists (rather broadly) credit for considering the ethics of the political realm of life. But most pacifists spend much more time thinking about warfare than they do about police work. And they spend almost no time considering the

non-coercive elements of political life, so we really can't say that classic pacifists are even fully engaged in the ethics of politics.

If we are going to incorporate a fuller vision represented by shalomic peace, we have to give more thought to the other two "faces" of power. Boulding reminds us that most human interactions are not dominated by coercion, or the imposition of one person's will over another. Much of our life, for example, revolves around "exchange." Instead of threats, exchange involves bargains: "I'll do what you want if you do what I want." The heart of an exchange is a consensual transaction, where both sides choose to participate.

Even governments expend most of their energies in exchange transactions, at least in the democratic West. They employ bureaucrats at wages arrived at through contracts freely made. Many public services are essentially sold to willing buyers. International relations are built on a web of treaty and other relationships, most of which are essentially consensual.

But the pre-eminent institution of exchange in modern society is the market. The contract is the classic vehicle for consensual relationships in a capitalist economy. Contract law is designed to help us know when transactions are really consensual, conscious acts of will by both sides. Transactions that are coerced, or a result of fraud, misrepresentation, or lack of capacity to exercise will are not enforced. In Western societies, a superstructure of law has developed designed to protect the consensual nature of the market B labor laws, antitrust regulations, anti-bribery laws, consumer protection laws, etc.

A pacifist has almost nothing to say about how to be a peacemaker in the market B or any other arena of consensual relationships. A pacifist might urge us to avoid investing in arms manufacturers. But I suspect the Bible teaches a vision of peacemaking in markets that goes well beyond minimal socially responsible investing.

And then there is Boulding's third face of power, which he calls affiliation, integration, or even love. Affiliation power does not turn on either threats or exchanges, but rather on identification with another. The person under the influence of affiliation power says "I'll do what is good for you because you matter to me."

Governments trade on affiliation power, to be sure. Patriotism is only one example, including its nationalistic forms. Markets also employ affiliation power. Michael Jordan's value as an advertising icon is almost entirely affiliative. I suspect Britney Spears' market value as a musician may also be almost entirely affiliative, although I cannot speak from any personal experience on that question. But there are realms of human life that are

mostly affiliative. Families come to mind, as do clubs, churches, social groups, and voluntary organizations. I would like to lump all these groups under the heading of "communities."

It is true that communities use coercion B I know I used to on my kids, although they probably wouldn't respond to it much anymore now that I'm not several times their size. And communities sometimes use exchange. But it is still fair to say that communities are the arenas where affiliation power is the main medium of influence; markets are where exchange predominates; and politics is where coercion comes into focus.

IV. The Biblical Message on Peacemaking

The Bible addresses peacemaking in all three aspects of our lives: coercive areas such as governments, exchange points including markets, and areas of affiliation which we are calling "communities." When we catch the Bible's drift on this fuller vision of peacemaking, we will find that the way before us, far from being passive, pulls us into action on fronts in every arena of life. The complete peacemaker is a listener, creator, visionary, activist, and culture builder who finds ways to nourish shalomist peace in every arena of life.

Most of the Biblical studies of peacemaking and pacifism take a detailed, passage-by-passage approach. Done poorly, that approach descends to the level of proof-texting, picking and choosing among the verses that support one's position. Some books do better by including discussion of the "problem" texts B the ones that proof-texters for military service might pick out. The good text-by-text studies help us stay connected to the Bible as the Word of God. They reproduce in Bible study the close attention Friends give to individual comments people make in open worship. One cannot know God's voice without listening to it closely.

But I want to join those who take a different approach. In this paper I almost ignore individual texts, to try to capture the broadest themes in the Bible. Partly this is a concession to time and space. Partly it is a concession to laziness. But my principle justification for this approach is the one I alluded to earlier. To know what the Bible teaches, and even to find a way to harmonize individual passages in tension with each other, we have to step back and try to see the entire Biblical text as a whole.

The Bible has many themes. But when it comes to teaching us about peacemaking, it seems to have at least these six:

1. God is the omnipotent Creator

2. God is love

3. God is truth

4. God is merciful and just

5. Everything is God's

6. The world is fallen but redeemed and the people in it are of infinite value

These may seem like obvious points, pretty standard Christian theology. But their implications have some interesting impacts on how we might understand peacemaking. Taking all six together lets us build one upon the other in exciting ways.

1. God is the omnipotent Creator

God, who created the universe, cannot be confined to it. Things can happen which do not follow our settled (and sometimes dismal) expectations. That is, miracles are possible. Bible believers should expect them, at least once in a while. Biblical peacemakers look beyond appearances for that of God in every reality.

2. God is love.

If God is love, and loves us (and the rest of creation), what does this mean? There are a lot of ways to describe love. Some of them are pretty extravagant. For our purposes I am ready to settle for a rather skimpy definition of love: wanting the loved one to have a way to meet her needs. Some may not be satisfied with this definition of love. Couldn't we ask for just a little bit more in our definition of the kind of love a Creator and Redeemer would have for us? Even George Bailey, in the classic film *It's A Wonderful Life*, before he was ready to confess his love for Mary, was already prepared to promise her the moon.

Maybe we could say more about God's love than "wanting us to have ways to meet our needs." Go ahead, be more expansive if you wish. But the skimpy version is more than enough to lead us directly to some rather eye-popping conclusions, as we will see directly, so I am a little nervous about using a richer conception of God's love.

What if we join the first theme (God as omnipotent) with this theme (God loves us)? The first theme tells us that anything God wants is possible B God couldn't very well be omnipotent if this were not true. The second one tells us that God wants us all to have ways to meet our needs. Put them together, and it adds up to this: in any situation, God wants us to have ways to meet our needs, and what God wants is possible. Thus, no

matter how desperate the conflict seems, there must exist some way for all needs to be met.

This is not the same as saying all needs are always met. According to the Bible, God has left us free to make choices, to both err and succeed. Each time a poor choice is made, opportunities are lost. We sometimes miss opportunities, even deliberately sometimes. But they were there. They are there still if time has not run out.

The Biblical peacemaker is caught in a wonderful trap called Hope. Believing the Bible's depiction of a loving omnipotent God, she can at the minimum come to any situation confident that God has a way in mind for all needs to be met. Like the boy looking for the pony in a room full of manure, the Biblical peacemaker knows there is that of God even in the middle of a fight.

The Biblical peacemaker will never settle for leaving anyone out with no way to meet their needs. To do so would be to despair, to disbelieve in God. Instead, she will take risks and embody Hope.

3. God is Truth

We are used to affirming that "the truth will set you free." What we mean by that is often obscure. The Biblical portrait of God as Truth, as the personification of this ideal, has implications which are important for peacemaking.

Right off the bat, it becomes pretty much impossible for a Biblical peacemaker to succumb to thoroughgoing relativism. Sure, different cultures do things differently, and there is no automatic standing for a member of one culture to criticize another based on its difference. But if God personifies Truth, then there is a Standard to which all cultures, and all persons, are accountable. Or, to put the point in more Gandhian terms, there is Truth toward which we all should aspire to grow.

Conflict becomes largely a process by which the disputants are invited by God to learn more about Truth, from each other and from the context of their disputing. Biblical peacemakers are pushed to approach issues with humility. God knows everything, but we don't. The Bible has plenty of accounts of God using surprising people (or even donkeys, whirlwinds, or bushes) to teach the devout something crucial about Truth.

Thus, the peacemaker, knowing that she sees only "through a glass darkly" whereas God sees everything clearly, learns to listen to everyone (and, I suppose in some way) to everything, expecting to hear the voice of God. She listens in Meeting, of course, and to her

mentors. But she also listens to her enemies, even the worst of them; and even to the natural order. I don't know what I think about the notion of natural law, but the Biblical lesson seems to be to listen wherever that of God can be found. And nature is certainly one of those places.

Conversely, if God may be expected to teach through anyone, then in order for Truth to be one, everyone must have a voice. Having a way to be heard is a basic human need, a requirement for finding and doing God's will (and, thus, a factor in deciding what is a true "minimum wage" as we will discuss below).

If Truth is an attribute of God and the ultimate good, then we can rely on the truthful to be good for us, and for everyone else. Evil may be understood as distance from Truth. Anything that is true cannot harm us. Certainly they don't bribe or take bribes: they want choices to be made on their merits. But Biblical peacemakers go much further. They refuse to cut any moral corners. They don't manipulate facts, or deceive. They are transparent to their friends and their enemies. The last thing a Biblical peacemaker wants is for anyone to make a choice while laboring under a misconception.

Faith in the benefits of seeking Truth, and humility about one's own grasp of it, gives Biblical peacemakers a renewed respect for authorities outside themselves. Friends submit leadings to the Meeting to be sure to confirm their Truthfulness. This is an expression of both humility and faith out of respect for Truth. Biblical peacemakers show similar respect for anyone, or any group, who shares the Meeting's advantages in seeking Truth: better connections with reality's immense variety, and with the needs and wants of other people; better capacity to reflect, independent of one's own passions or self-interest; more opportunity to coordinate one's own actions with others. Democratic legislatures score very highly on these variables, as do judges in common law traditions amid effective adversarial process. If either agency tells you not to sell coffee at 180 degrees through a drive up window, you can be fairly confident their edicts hew closely to Truth, closer than you are likely to be able to do with your limited contacts and unconscious biases.

Because Biblical peacemakers believe Truth and Goodness are both attributes of God, they go into conflict humbly, expecting to learn from any quarter, trying to give voice to everyone (and maybe even every thing) affected by the dispute. They are transparent in their own lives, and encourage it in others. They acknowledge the strengths of those who are in a better position to assess the Truth in an issue. They tend to find their worlds populated by legitimate authorities, and accord them due deference rather than pridefully assuming their own superiority at discerning Truth.