

## Practicing the Peace of Christ

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Christians often take “wars and rumors of wars” as signs of the end, but sustained periods of peace are in fact historically rare. Violence and war always seem to be around the corner. Even for those of us who are blessed to live in relatively conflict-free zones of the world, national leaders often invest astronomical amount of wealth preparing for war. The United States, for instance, spends more than half of its national discretionary budget (598.5 billion dollars) on a military industrial complex but only six percent on health and education. There are nearly two hundred independent nations in the world, but only fifteen are without armed forces. Few things dispel the myth of human progress more than the fact that we continue to find more effective and creative ways to kill.

Our faith in the virtues of organized force only seems to grow as violence escalates. We often hear that war is what protects civilization from the onslaught of evil. As a result of this belief, organized violence takes on a religious quality: killing and dying for the nation, or some other “legitimate” political cause, are transformed into acts of “sacrifice” and “patriotism.” It is not surprising that recent attacks on civilians in Europe and the United States are fueling calls for retaliatory warfare against the Islamic State in the name of freedom and security. Because security is the overarching concern for many nation-states, citizens are regularly taught to be suspicious of strangers, refugees, and the needy—an attitude that is presumed to be more appropriate and necessary in a post 9/11 world. In such a situation, the message of the gospel could not sound less reasonable.

In the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” This sounds naïve to the contemporary reader—or just false. Where is the evidence of this peace? How can we not be afraid when there is so much to fear?

John’s Gospel is well known for its emphasis on the not-this-worldliness of Jesus’ message. Unfortunately, this has led many to wrongly conclude that the kingdom Jesus lived and died for is an otherworldly reality. Others, like those attracted to the unequivocally earthly character of the Old Testament prophets of justice, tend to downplay passages like the one I just quoted. They downplay these passages in order to shed the gospel of its supposedly otherworldly, spiritual, or superstitious elements. Both are gravely mistaken. The gospel calls us to a more radical understanding of Jesus’ claim that his peace is not of this world, and to see how his peace challenges us to live differently today.

Toward the end of John’s Gospel narrative, at the climax of the story where heaven and earth finally collide, Jesus complicates things further. Confronted by Pontius Pilate, the quintessential embodiment of this world’s “principalities and powers,” Jesus cryptically retorted, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent me from being arrested by the leaders.”

“So you are a king, then!” Pilate shot back.

He was notably frustrated by Jesus’ cryptic answer. If Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world, why was his message so threatening to the religious and political establishment of his time? Why were the religious and political oligarchy so determined to pin every petty crime on Jesus in order to put him to death? After all, who would care about what Jesus believed and what religion he practiced on his personal time, even if they were somewhat unique and peculiar? After all, religious diversity was widely celebrated and

tolerance commonly practiced in the ancient world. Yet, if the kingdom is a this-worldly reality, why did Jesus say that his kingdom is not of this world?

The answer can only be that the kingdom is at once this-worldly and other-worldly. It is the paradoxical nature of the Christian gospel that challenges simplistic interpreters of the Christian Gospel.

The struggle between heaven and earth is not between a worldly and other-worldly reality. The message of Jesus has nothing to do with escaping the world, as the ancient Gnostics Christians have assumed. Paul is very clear about this. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (8:10-11), "If Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you." Later in verses 20-21, we read: "For creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." For Paul, Christ did not simply come to redeem our immaterial souls, but creation itself.

*The struggle between heaven and earth is, therefore, between two different ways of being in the world.* The contradiction between Pilate and Jesus is between two opposing patterns of life: one that is defined by the inertia of the flesh, the other by the spirit of freedom. One pattern leads to death, as Jesus tells us, the other to abundant life.

Reminiscent of God giving Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel instituted this new pattern of life. In a world that celebrates wealth, power, and honor, Jesus told his followers that the meek, the poor, and the peacemakers are blessed. To say that the kingdom of peace is both worldly and other-worldly is to say that the kingdom is a present reality that runs counter to the world as it is.

There is more to the story, of course. The kingdom is also other-worldly in another crucial sense. The kingdom is the reality of our peaceable relations with one another and God when we are fully united to Christ. It is established by God, not by human efforts. It is a reality that will come to fulfillment only at the end of history. Therefore, it is important to remember that in whatever manner the kingdom is present today, it is fragile, elusive, and often mixed up with its opposite. Perhaps this is the reason that while Paul calls the church the body of Jesus Christ, the first fruit of the new creation, he cautions his congregations to stay vigilant and "work out their salvation with fear and trembling." Christians are called neither to pessimism nor optimism, but to faithfulness and hopeful vigilance.

We see the same contest in Paul's other epistles. The contest, writes Paul, is between flesh and spirit. In Galatians, he contrasted acts of the "flesh" with acts of the "spirit." Contrary to the Gnostics of his time, in Paul's use of the words, "flesh" does not mean body or material life; he does not say that we should abandon this life and our bodies, or view them with contempt in pursuit of inner "spiritual" liberation. Rather, flesh and spirit are *two different ways of being in the body*. In 1 Corinthians, Paul distinguishes a natural body from a spiritual body. The first is defined by bondage and the second by freedom. Both are bodies, but they run on different fuels. Yet this still leaves the question of how Jesus' pattern of life differs from the worldly pattern of life. What is it that distinguishes one from the other? Furthermore, how is this new life made possible by Christ and not our efforts?

Indeed, the new life instituted by the spirit of Christ has many identifying markers, but one mark is primary: peacefulness. Romans 13 is often cited by Christians to justify state violence and Christian involvement in warfare, but that is only because few have read the chapter before. Paul begins Romans 12 by telling his fellow Christians not to follow “the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind.” He provides a brief description of what life under the spirit would look like:

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone ... Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. (Romans 12:12-19)

Paul’s description here parallels Jesus’. In Matthew, Jesus said to his disciples:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant. (Matthew 20:25-26)

From Paul’s and Jesus’ account of the Christian life, we can also discern what the non-Christian life looks like. If life under the Spirit is marked by love, hospitality, generosity, servanthood, and peaceableness, life under the flesh is marked by hatred, suspicion, selfishness, authoritarianism, revenge, and violence. Life under the Spirit is empowered by hope and patience, while life under the flesh is dominated by fear and control.

We live in a world defined by fear and control. This results in a culture of speed, efficiency, acquisition, and war. What we lack as individuals and as a society is often patience. The culture of the “now” is driven primarily by fear and, more specifically, the fear of death. Seasoned journalist, activists, and preacher Chris Hedges observes that “It is death we are trying to flee. The smallness of our lives, the transitory nature of existence, the inevitable road to old age, are what the idols of power, celebrity, and wealth tell us we can escape” (*The World as It Is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress*, 11). Escaping death entails the rejection of the contingency of our transitory lives. This rejection is the original sin against God’s divinity. It is through the perceived power of the idols of power, celebrity, wealth, and nation that we strive to master our own existence. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it poignantly:

When we say we want peace, we mean we want order. Our greatest illusion and deception, therefore, is that we are a peaceable people, nonviolence to the core. We are peaceable so long as no one disturbs our illusions. We are nonviolent as long as no one challenges our turf. So violence becomes needlessly woven into our lives; it becomes the warp on which the fabric of our existence is threaded ... What is true at the personal level is even more the case when we confront one another as ‘societies’ organized to protect and enhance our most cherished pretensions (*The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, 144).

Today, we are mostly concerned about trying to master our bodies with fashionable diets, minimizing the risk of meeting strangers by online dating, bypassing the complexity of friendship by social media, evading a hollow and meaningless life by watching reality T.V. shows, and avoiding the costs of real

solidarity by empty political statements on Facebook or Twitter. By these instruments we are promised all the benefits without the risk, even as these same instruments covertly, but swiftly dismantle the basic fabric of our spiritual life.

In the political sphere, this fear of death translates into xenophobia, permanent war, imperialism, authoritarianism, economic centralization, and political celebrityism. Our desire to master our lives—and therefore, by implication, everything else—is kindled by the denial of our contingency and creatureliness. But ironically, this will to mastery is what enslaves us to the principalities and the powers. The will to power is what keeps us trapped in the inertia of the flesh. When we submit to this culture, we lose our freedom. In our culture's collective attempt to save its own life, we will have lost it, as Jesus told us we would.

Isn't a purely private form of spirituality just another manifestation of the will to power, a way to secure the benefits of faith without the baggage of tradition and community? Is not the love of God without the love of neighbor just a religious form of narcissism? This applies to individuals and to church communities. Are we not simply creating God in our own image if our community refuses to let our understanding of God be challenged by other Christians, and by the great theological traditions that came before us? It is not surprising that a church that is marinating in this culture—and stands helpless before it—is particularly prone to sectarianism, conspiracy theories, and self-obsession.

The gospel of Jesus Christ turns this picture upside down. Our faith teaches that the one who is truly free is the one who has lived his life solely for others to the point of losing it, and raised from the dead by God. The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches that the path to life is living for others. It teaches that happy is he who was nailed to the cross for the sake of our salvation. As Christians, we believe that this brutalized, disfigured, and bloody man, this one who was powerlessly nailed to the cross, is the most blessed man on earth, and *therefore* we believe that the happiest place on earth is *not* Disneyland, but at the foot of this man's cross. Sabbath after Sabbath, pastors tell us that the Spirit of the man who ate with sinners, who preached the good news to the poor, who had no place to lay his head, whom the powerful conspired to assassinate—the Spirit of this man is the very Spirit who now animates his church. We are told that this man, by losing everything, has conquered death itself. Therefore, we, the church gathered to this crucified and risen one, are given unlimited time and eternal life. This is what it means to anticipate the second coming of our Lord.

Christians live in a different time zone: the eschatological time zone. We inhabit time differently, and therefore our pattern of life is defined by the spirit and not the flesh. According to the world, we must save our own lives in order to avoid death, which is the termination of time. This is why the world is always in a rush. We are told to rush because, if we don't, we might miss something—perhaps an opportunity to get rich or a chance to counter a threat. Rushing makes the world seem black and white, because quick decisions must be made. It makes us suspicious of strangers. It compels us to sacrifice the truth in the name of pragmatism. It makes us unresponsive to the needs of others for the sake of power and control. According to our faith, however, our lives are already lost, lost to the one who has conquered death, not by rushing through it, but by taking the time to tend his flock. Christians live according to eschatological time.

Living in eschatological time can take many forms. Let me provide a few examples. As many undocumented immigrants and political refugees in the United States faced deportation back to war-torn countries in the 1980s, a network of many churches started the Sanctuary Movement sheltering

immigrants and refugees in defiance of federal laws. Members of the Sanctuary Movement subscribed to a law higher than that of the security of governments, the law of hospitality. More recently, in response to the decade long U.S. led sanctions against Iraq, which led to the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children and civilians, Voices in the Wilderness brought food and medicine directly to Iraq, ignoring international sanctions. Voices in the Wilderness was inspired by the long tradition of Christian nonviolent direct action. Members of the organization understood that the Christian responsibility of care transcends national boundaries and loyalties. There are many examples of Christians overcoming artificial boundaries for the sake of love and hospitality. In the Adventist church, Desmond Doss' refusal to take up arms against enemy combatants during World War II and his commitment to treat the injuries of both comrades and enemies alike flowed directly out of his Christian faith. What all of these Christian witness have in common is that they prioritized patient faithfulness over the demands of the flesh. They lived and indeed still live in eschatological time.

By faith, Christians are given time to take. They are, in other words, empowered to be patient. Patience is not passivity. Most of the most satisfying and worthwhile things we do require patience, like learning a new language, playing an instrument, building a social movement, and, dare I say, growing into faithful Christians. Patience is the refusal to be dictated by the exigencies of the world. We are freed, by the resurrection of our Lord, to take the time to learn, think, to tend to the needs of others, to confront the messiness of life with confidence and grace, to bear the cost of solidarity, to have a heated argument with our adversaries, and to avoid resorting to violence in order to resolve our differences. We are free, because Christ is risen.

This serenity is the peace that Christ gives. It is a peace that the world cannot offer, an eschatological peace that is already breaking into our world. Therefore, we must daily pray that God will grant us the strength to hope against hope so that we might be made worthy for the kingdom that is and is still to come. So let us heed our Lord's commandment: be not afraid, for the kingdom of God is near.