

God's Community of Peace

One cannot truly fulfill the commands of Jesus without understanding and following his commands on how we live with each other and how we ourselves are peacemakers in a world where violence and conflict seem rampant. The USMB Board of Faith and Life encourages all congregations to conduct the following Bible Studies as a way to more fully understand and commit to the Jesus way of peace.

Where Peacemaking Begins

Article 13 of our MB Confession of Faith calls us to Christian peacemaking: "We actively pursue peace and reconciliation in all relationships by following Christ's example and his command to love God, neighbors and even our enemies. We strive to be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation in families, churches, communities, in our nation and throughout the world."

The question we ask is not should we be peacemakers? But how can we be the peacemakers Jesus calls us to be? Where does peacemaking begin? Peacemaking begins not with the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9) or even with Jesus' words, "I tell you, 'Love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you'" (Luke 6:27).

Peacemaking begins with the Great Commission on the mountain in Galilee where Jesus says: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). Only Christian disciples can truly be peacemakers in the style of Jesus.

■ Christ's final command

The final command Jesus gave his disciples and us was not, "Go and make peace," but "Go and make disciples." Jesus commands us to be disciple-makers before we are peacemakers. Why?

For years, it was popular for Mennonite and other peace churches to have a sign advertising their church that said, "No Jesus, no peace. Know Jesus, know peace." While such signs may seem trite or passé, they remind us that peace and peacemaking begin with a call to discipleship. Article 7 (Mission of the Church) of our Confession of Faith states: "Christ commands the church to make disciples of all nations by calling people to repent and by baptizing and teaching them to obey Jesus."

■ Peace with God

What is the source of suffering, strife, injustice, violence and war in our world? The source is sin. Article 4 (Sin and Evil) of our Confession of Faith states: "Whether in word, deed, thought or attitude, all humans are under the domi-

nation of sin and, on their own, are unable to overcome its power."

Suffering and violence in our world are only symptoms of sin that enslave all of humanity. People are enslaved by the power of sin and need salvation. The good news is that God provides salvation from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus brings salvation from sin so that people can be freed from the power of sin and have peace with God. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

■ Peacemaking by proclaiming the good news of salvation

Peace with God is the first step toward peace and peacemaking in our world. Article 5 (Salvation) of our Confession of Faith declares: "Convicted by the Holy Spirit, people turn from sin, entrust their lives to God, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and join the family of God. All who receive Christ are born again and have peace with God and are called to love one another and live at peace with their neighbor."

Peace with God comes only through Jesus Christ. God's Word and our Confession of Faith make it clear that the only way for people to live in peace with their neighbors and even their enemies is first to have peace with God by being born into the family of God. Peacemaking begins by proclaiming the good news of salvation from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Accepting this good news is what brings peace with God. Peacemaking continues as we teach disciples to obey the commands Jesus has given us, including the command to live in peace.

■ Questions for discussion:

1. Why is disciple-making the first step in peacemaking?
2. Why is sin the source of suffering, strife, violence, injustice and war in our world?
3. Is peacemaking at the core of Jesus' teaching? Are there limits to the peacemaking mandate?
4. Why do we say it is impossible to live in peace with others if we are not at peace with God?

Peacemaking in marriages & families

God created man and woman in his own image, joined them in marriage and placed them in a perfect world. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in complete peace. Sin entered the world when they chose to listen to Satan, the tempter, and disobeyed God. Peace was shattered when Adam and Eve sinned, and they entered a world of conflict, strife, violence and suffering.

The birth of children brought more conflict, strife, violence and suffering. Cain killed his brother Abel. The Old Testament records how the pattern of conflict, strife, violence and suffering in marriages and in families continued generation after generation. Tragically it continues today, even among the marriages and families of believers.

■ Conflict at home

Conflict in marriages and among family members is inevitable, for we are all less than perfect people. Jesus, however, calls us to peacemaking in our marriages and families. How? Peacemaking in marriages and families begins with the Great Commission.

In the Great Commission Jesus calls us not only to make disciples and baptize disciples, he also calls us to teach baptized disciples to “obey everything I have commanded you.” Being a baptized disciple is only the beginning of peace. Peace continues as we, disciples, obey what Jesus commands us.

What does Jesus command? “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another,” says Jesus in John 13:34. Peace in the marriages and families of disciples comes not just from loving one another but from also obeying Christ’s command to love one another as he loves us. How does Jesus love us?

■ Taking the first step

When Adam and Eve sinned and hid from God, who took the first step toward reconciliation? God did. God went looking for Adam and Eve. When we sin God also takes the first step. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9).

Who is to blame for the sin that causes our broken relationships with God? We ourselves are to blame. We were the ones who sinned, yet God took

the first step and came to us to heal the broken relationship with him and to make peace.

When there is conflict and strife in marriage or among family members, we blame others, and they blame us. As a result, the conflict and strife continues. Loving as Jesus loves us means taking the first step to heal the broken relationship by going to the other person with whom there is conflict, no matter who is to blame. Peacemaking means loving as Jesus loves by taking the first step.

■ Accepting blame

Jesus is not to blame for the sin that breaks our relationship with him. Yet he takes the blame so we can be reconciled to God. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Loving as Jesus loves us means assuming blame for disagreements and contention. No one is without blame when there is conflict and strife. Being a peacemaker in our marriages and our families means admitting that we helped cause the conflict. We make peace when we go to the person we are in conflict with and say, “I was wrong; forgive me.”

■ The importance of forgiving

Because Jesus loves us, he forgives us when we sin against him. Loving as Jesus loves means forgiving others just as Christ forgives us (Eph. 4:32). Without forgiveness there cannot be peace in marriages or in families. We do not forgive because the other person deserves or earns forgiveness. Jesus forgives us even though we do not deserve or earn forgiveness. Peacemaking means loving others as Jesus loves us and forgiving others because Jesus forgives us.

■ Questions for discussion:

1. Why is obeying Jesus so important to peace in marriages and families?
2. Why is taking the first step so important to peace in marriages and families?
3. In our marriage conflicts, why is it important for each person to “own his/her own stuff” before blaming the other?
4. How do unresolved conflicts in marriage impact the children and other relationships?

Peacemaking in our relationships and the church

The church was empowered at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon followers of Jesus as they gathered. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter preached a message of repentance and the forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ. Three thousand people were added to the church that day. The church continued to grow and believers were one in heart and mind (Acts 4:32). It did not take long, however, for conflict to enter the church.

Conflict began when Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive the apostles. Conflict continued when the Grecian Jews in the church complained that their widows were being neglected. Later Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways after a "sharp disagreement" (Acts 15:39). Many of the letters written to various New Testament churches include admonitions concerning conflict within the churches.

Conflict in the church continues today as members argue over worship styles, leadership styles, church polity, finances, dress and even the color of carpeting. Church leaders spend time and spiritual and emotional energy dealing with conflict in the church. Why is there so much conflict in the church and in our relationships with others?

■ Selfishness and pride

God's Word reveals the source of conflict in James 4:1-2: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight."

Conflict comes because we are all selfish people. We want our own way and want people to do things our way. We are proud and think that our way is the right way and the only way. Because we are selfish and proud, we want people to serve us. We want things done our way. Conflict comes from selfishness and pride in our lives.

■ Unselfishness and humility

What is the solution to conflict in churches and in our lives? How can we be peacemakers and sow in peace so we can reap a harvest of righteousness (James 3:18)? Peace in church and in relationships comes when we obey the command of Jesus to love

as he loved, for love is neither selfish nor proud (1 Cor. 13:4-5).

In his letter to believers in Philippi, Paul admonishes two church members who were arguing. He uses the example of Christ to call us to unselfishness and humility: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:3-5).

Jesus was not selfish. He gave up the rights of his equality with God to come and live among us. Jesus was not proud. He humbled himself and served us in his self-sacrificial life and in his death on the cross. Jesus was neither selfish nor proud and came "not to be served, but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

We are peacemakers, and we love as Jesus loves when we willingly give up our right to have things our way. Loving others as Christ loves us means dying to our own selfishness and choosing to live for what God wants. We continue to be peacemakers and to love as Jesus loves by humbling ourselves, admitting that we are sinners who are proud and selfish and want our own way.

Humility means being willing to serve instead of demanding to be served. Humility is essential to peacemaking. God's Word says, "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:5-6).

■ Questions for discussion:

1. Will "going back to being the church in the New Testament" bring peace to our churches?
2. Why do selfishness and pride bring conflict?
3. What are the consequences of unresolved conflict within the church?
4. What impact does internal church conflict have on the integrity of the church before the watching world?

Peacemaking in our nation and our world

Pursuing peace and being peacemakers are not unique to the church. The world also pursues peace. The church is unique, however, in the way it seeks to be peacemakers and to bring peace.

During the Wild West, the Colt .45 six-shooter revolver that “won the West” was called the “Peacemaker.” During the Cold War the motto of the United States Strategic Air Command that controlled the fleet of nuclear bombers and missiles was “Peace Is Our Profession.” The world pursues peace and peacemaking through violence, bloodshed and war. The world seeks peace by destroying its enemies. Believers, however, pursue peace and peacemaking by loving as Christ loves and obeying the command of Jesus to “love your enemies and do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27).

■ Called to obedience

Pursuing peace and being peacemakers in our world of conflict, violence, bloodshed and war seems impossible. Jesus himself says, “You will hear of wars and rumors of war, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matt. 24:6-7). If Jesus says that war and violence will continue until the end, what good does it do for us believers to seek peace and to be peacemakers?

We seek peace because Jesus calls us to be peacemakers that are obedient, not necessarily successful. We obey Christ’s command to love our enemies and leave the results to him. How do we obey Christ’s command to love God, our neighbors and even our enemies? We obey by being what Jesus called us to be. We obey by being salt and light.

■ Peacemakers are salt

Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13). Salt makes food taste good. “As peacemakers we alleviate suffering, reduce strife, promote justice and work to end violence and war, that others may see a demonstration of Christ’s love” (Confession of Faith, Article 13). Will we alleviate all suffering, reduce all strife, bring complete justice or end all violence and war? No, but by loving as Christ loves and serving others we give the world a taste of God’s love and goodness rather than a taste of revenge.

When we are salt, we help the world “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). Obeying Christ’s command to love as he loves and be peacemakers by being salt is an act of trust. Our peacemaking may seem to make no difference at all in our world. But our trust is in the Lord, not in our peacemaking. When we obey and trust the Lord, we are blessed, for “blessed is the one who trusts in him” (Ps. 34:8b).

■ Peacemakers are light

Jesus says, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ...Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14-16). When the sun shines during the day, darkness is driven away, and we see the beauty and greatness of God’s creation. When we love as Jesus loves, when we love our enemies by doing good instead of evil, we are light and drive out the darkness of sin and evil. Then the world can see the greatness of God’s love.

The world may reject the light and choose darkness. But just as the sun does not stop shining even though half of the world is in darkness, we do not stop loving our enemies but rather faithfully obey Jesus. By being light and doing good we overcome the darkness of evil with good (Rom. 12:21).

■ Obeying Jesus

Young women and men often ask the question, “How can I serve my country?” and answer it by entering the military. However, as followers of Jesus, our first question is: “How can I serve and obey Jesus by being salt and light?” Because our first allegiance as believers is to Jesus, many believers choose to be salt and light by not participating in the military but rather by serving in other alternative ways.

■ Questions for discussion:

1. Why is obedience more important than success?
2. How can our actions give the world a taste of Christ’s love?
3. What are some examples of Christians facing a choice between national citizenship and kingdom citizenship?