

Response

Christian Peacemaking

by

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“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called [children] of God.” (Matt. 5.9)

Jeren Rowell identifies practical implications of the Church’s holiness, concluding with “four observations on how local congregations can grow in the understanding, experience, and practice of corporate holiness.” He gathers those remarks around four themes: worship, forgiveness, unity, and service.

This response identifies another theme that should be central to any discussion of the practical implications of the Church’s holiness. “Christian peacemaking” is a theme present in various strands of Nazarene life but rarely articulated in our literature. And yet it should be. *Nazarene memory* at this point can be enriched by the *Christian Church’s wider memory*, for Christian history not only shapes present realities but reminds us “who we are” and provides grist for reflection on “who we yet may be.”

A small but noteworthy chapter in Christian history was written in the 20th century as the “three historic peace churches” (Quakers, Mennonites, and Church of the Brethren) reconceptualized their mission in the world. Earlier generations of these churches had understood their distinct mission as refraining from warfare, forsaking secular law courts, and non-swearing of oaths. But the peace churches gradually perceived peacemaking in the modern era as something Christians should actively do, not simply refrain from doing. Peacemaking became *proactive* rather than *reactive*. An impressive array of initiatives developed from this ongoing reflection, including Mennonite Central Committee (an international social ministry agency), Mennonite Voluntary Service (a U.S. service agency), The American Friends Service Committee, and the Brethren Service Committee. Local congregations studied conflict resolution, applied its principles to their internal conflicts, and taught them to others. Peace churches opened neighborhood arbitration centers and developed other reconciling ministries.

Why should this recent history inform Nazarenes?

The mandate to be peacemakers is scriptural. “Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12.14, RSV). The imperative here is not about “sweetness” but about initiative, imitating that taken by our Crucified Lord. As Ron Sider wrote:

In Romans 5, Paul indicates that we perceive the depth of divine love only when we see that the crucified Jesus died for his *enemies*. Because of our sins, we had both earned [God’s wrath] and also become hostile to God. ‘But God showed his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. . . . While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God

by the death of his Son.’ Love for enemies is not just part of Jesus’ teaching; it is at the heart of his atonement.¹

How does the principle at stake in atonement—the reconciliation of enemies—relate to our individual and corporate witness? Could the principle at work in atonement also function as the axis of our Christian ethics, especially in their social dimensions? Should our efforts to facilitate the reconciliation of sinners to Divine Love have their analog in parallel efforts to facilitate the reconciliation of various members of the human family to one another?

The “Hallelujah March” around the General Assembly tent at Pilot Point is one of our denomination’s enduring symbols. But consider how unlikely this scene was. A divisive Civil War had ruined a nation and poisoned the well of American Christianity. Methodists, divided in 1843 by conflicts based on region and racial ideologies, did not reunite until 1939. Presbyterians did not do so until 1983. Baptists have not reunited and may never do so. During that civil conflict, Bresee draped his pulpit in the American flag. And when he made the decision to leave Iowa in 1883, he had two prospects: California and Texas. He chose California because, according to Girvin, he felt he could not minister among Southern people. Jernigan’s father, on the other hand, had served in the Confederate military, while his mother confronted Yankee troops scavenging for supplies. Contemplate these various images for a moment; they are central to understanding the enduring value of Pilot Point. The Hallelujah March, by all accounts, sprang from spontaneous joy after the vote to merge the Northern and Southern denominations took place. But it was not holiness as theory or abstraction that inspired it, but holiness as a social reality—a *real force*, set loose upon the world, was bringing peace to enemies and reconciling strangers to one another. The Church, moving through the Spirit’s power, was reconciling people through God to one another. “And the gates of Hell shall not withstand it.”

Peacemaking springs from worship, Rowell’s first theme. The process culminating in the Hallelujah March had been several initiated days earlier by sermon and eucharist. And notice what the concept of peacemaking does to Rowell’s other three themes (forgiveness, unity, and service): it bridges them; it is the concept that unifies them. The holiness of the Church is ultimately God’s work, communicated through the various means of grace and especially through baptism and eucharist—God’s sacraments for the Church. But the Christian life (the living witness of saints) is God’s sacrament to the world—the body of Christ that becomes means of grace to others.

Peacemaking is too central to the Gospel to be left to “traditional peace churches.” Nazarenes and other Christians should cultivate an intentional peacemaking mindset that is integrated into our reflection, prayers, discourse, and actions.

In 1978 the peace churches sponsored a national New Call to Peacemaking conference at Green Lake, Wis. Norval Hadley, an Evangelical Friend and leader within the Christian Holiness Association, helped organize it. But the New Call to Peacemaking’s keynote speaker did not belong to a historic peace church. He was Timothy Smith, a life-long member of the Church of the Nazarene. In mid-career, over a decade after writing *Called Unto Holiness*, the dean of Nazarene (and evangelical) church historians was convinced that peacemaking was an integral implication of the Church’s holiness. May we realize the same.

¹ Ron Sider, “To See the Cross, To Find the Tomb.” *The Other Side* (February 1977): 16-23.