

ARTICLE 13

Love and Nonresistance

God's Community of Peace

We believe that God in Christ reconciles people to Himself and to one another, making peace through the cross. The church is a fellowship of redeemed people living by love. Our bond with other believers of Jesus transcends all racial, social, and national barriers.

Christian Peacemaking

Believers seek to be agents of reconciliation in all relationships, to practice love of enemies as taught by Christ, to be peacemakers in all situations. We view violence in its many different forms as contradictory to the new nature of the Christian. We believe that the evil and inhumane nature of violence is contrary to the gospel of love and peace. In times of national conscription or war, we believe we are called to give alternative service where possible. Alleviating suffering, reducing strife, and promoting justice are ways of demonstrating Christ's love.

Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 5:17-28, 38-48; Romans 12:9-21; 13:8-10;
1 Peter 2:19-23.

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COMMENTARY

There have been many debates through the years about whether this article, “Love and Nonresistance,” should be relegated to a secondary role in our confession of faith. We have argued over how a citizen can be subject to governing authorities and also refuse military service. Or we have debated how this topic can be given such prominence in comparison to the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our biblical teaching on the article has languished in many of our churches because of such questions.

Teaching on this article must start with the good news of the gospel and develop out of a biblical concern for faithfulness as disciples of Jesus Christ. Peacemaking is rooted in the biblical teaching that Jesus is our peace. He broke down the walls that divide and alienate people, and created a new humanity (Ephesians 2:14-22). Jesus called his followers to a life of sacrificial love in which even our enemies should be treated with grace and forgiveness (Matthew 5:43-48). We have often interpreted these teachings too narrowly, for instance as a prohibition against killing or going to war. It is that, to be sure, but it is more. Peacemaking goes beyond a reactive response to military involvement. Biblically, it is understood proactively as seeking reconciliation and peace, and extending forgiveness and blessing to our neighbours, even our enemies.

This article is not an optional part of our confession. It describes our response to the violence, suffering, and injustice that is so much a part of contemporary society. It is particularly needed today because of the hatred and violence so prevalent in our families and neighbourhoods and on the streets of our cities. This confession makes explicit our commitment to alleviate suffering, reduce strife, and promote justice as part of our witness in today’s world.

Peacemaking Begins with the Gospel

The heart of a theology of peacemaking is the reconciling work of Christ on the cross. Jesus came to address the broken relationship between God and humanity. In his sacrificial death, our Lord not only redeemed us but reconciled all humanity into one. He broke down the walls of hostility between opposing cultures, societal factions, and between male and female (Galatians 3:28ff.). He destroyed the barriers which divide people. Through his death, former enemies are reconciled to live at peace as brothers and sisters in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-18).

Our Lord not only made it possible for enemies to be at peace, but he called us to a ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). Jesus taught that the way of peace lies in extending forgiveness to those who have sinned against us, to bless our enemies rather than curse them (Matthew 5:43-48), and to bind up the wounds of those who are injured even if they are different from us (Luke 10:25-37).

Peacemaking Rather than Pacifism

The call to biblical peacemaking challenges us to be more than passive nonresistors. The word “peacemaker” combines the meaning of well-being or wholeness with the idea of action. A peacemaker is one who actively intervenes in situations of conflict in order to establish peace. Jesus teaches that one of the ways to live as peacemakers is to refuse retaliation. The idea is both clear and radical. Do not resist but turn the other cheek. Do not insist on legal rights. Surrender personal property. Do not resist those who demand assistance. Give money instead of lending when a loan is requested (Matthew 5:38-42). Luke observes that we should refuse retaliation because of who God is. He is a God of grace and mercy. We should therefore respond to oppressors in like manner (Luke 6:32-38).

This proactive biblical warrant for peacemaking is not only emphasized in the Gospels. The apostles describe the life of the believing community in the same manner. Followers of Christ are to serve their enemies (Romans 12:20; 13:8-10), return good for evil (Romans 12:17, 21; 1 Peter 3:9), do good to all people (Romans 12:17; Galatians 6:10), and pursue peace with all people (Romans 12:18; 14:19; 1 Peter 3:11).

Peacemaking involves more than refusing to retaliate, however. It includes loving oppressors. Jesus is unambiguous. We are to love the people who hate us (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). He counters the morality which says “love your neighbours and hate your enemies” by challenging his followers to love even enemies (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). We are to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44). Rather than destroying them, we are to love in order to enhance and enrich their lives (Luke 6:27-36). We are called to respond in such extraordinary ways that we communicate the mercy of God and reflect His nature (Matthew 5:46-47; Luke 6:27-36). Indeed, peacemaking always has Christ’s mission of the church in mind, to fulfill our Lord’s command to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).

Peacemaking and the Kingdom

The redemptive work of Christ creates a new community of God’s people who live together according to a new order based upon the teachings and example of Jesus. Jesus called people to respond to this kingdom by

repenting, believing, and becoming members of the kingdom community. It is a unique community made up of people who were once enemies but are now reconciled to God and with one another. Their mission is to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18).

This new kingdom community lives in a unique relationship to the world system. The people of God are *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:15-16). They see themselves as pilgrims, strangers, and aliens whose citizenship is otherworldly (Hebrews 11:8-16; 1 Peter 2:9, 11; Philippians 3:20). They stand over against the worldly kingdom by keeping separated from the practices of the world. The apostle Paul describes this stance toward the world system as nonconformity (Romans 12:2). Having been transformed so as to know and do the will of God, the people of God now live in love and unity with each other, leaving vengeance to God, and practicing suffering love (Romans 12:14-21).

This new kingdom community has a new way of accomplishing its mission. It is the way of love rather than violence. Christ was clear in his comments to Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). When the Christian’s value system comes into conflict with the world system, priority is given to the kingdom of Christ. Christ is our example. In the face of ridicule and hostile forces, he modelled purity of heart and a loving and gracious spirit: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

Peacemaking Inwardly and Outwardly

Jesus summarized the whole of his teaching with the command to love both God and neighbour (Matthew 22:37-40; Luke 10:25-37). The teaching of peacemaking must embrace both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our love. The Scriptures emphasize that love for God can never remain only an upward and inward focus. Our love must extend to our neighbour. Jesus was clear that our neighbour includes anyone who is in need. Like the lawyer in Jesus’ day who asked “Who is my neighbour?” we want to limit neighbour love. Neighbour love includes all people—minorities, people of colour, the poor, the aged, the physically and mentally disabled, and so on. Peacemaking is driven by a love that knows no social or cultural conditions or limitations.

Teaching on peacemaking should start in the family, the most basic social relationship. How we live within the home is more indicative of our peacemaking convictions than our nonparticipation in the military. Our focus on peacemaking must also include neighbour relations in our

community. As peacemakers, we respond with love and compassion to our friends and neighbours next door, to our business associates in the office, to our students in the classroom, to the stranger on the street. Peacemakers are concerned to do good for rather than condemn other races, welfare recipients, strikers, criminals, employers, employees, and others commonly criticized and even hated.

Moreover, peacemaking makes little sense in the social-political sphere if it does not also impact our relationships within the church. Christ's teaching on loving our enemies is especially relevant for those in the church who fight and feud with one another. Indeed, peacemaking must begin in the household of faith. Wherever the seeds of enmity and malice have been sown, peacemakers sow love by word and deed.

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

Article 13 states clearly our commitment to alleviate suffering, reduce conflict, and promote justice as part of our witness in today's world.

We tend to respond to conflict and violence either by raising our voice and striking back, or by avoiding the conflict and walking away or remaining uninvolved. Christ chose a third option, peacemaking. He absorbed the evil and violence in himself, then released the perpetrators with grace and forgiveness, leaving vengeance and judgment to God. As followers of Jesus, our goal is a life of sacrificial love where even our enemies are treated with grace and forgiveness (Matthew 5:42-48). Christ calls us to be peacemakers—to stand between enemies to bring them together. To make peace is to stanch the flow of angry words, to cleanse the wound and bring healing to relationships. To make peace is to tear down barriers of misunderstanding and prejudice, anger, and hate, and to replace those barriers with bridges of acceptance, forgiveness, friendship, and love. This is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ; it is what we are called to be and to do as children of God (Matthew 5:9).

A New Model

Jesus models a new way for the kingdom community to live, a way of love rather than violence. The paradox of the cross is that it is precisely through suffering and death that resurrection life comes. We are called not only to believe this paradox, but to live it. This new kingdom claims our highest allegiance. A critical issue for its citizens is how to be both loyal to God and loyal to civil governments (Romans 13:1-7). Most Christians understand this to mean that Christians are called to obey the demands of the state whenever possible. This is not blind allegiance to civil authorities, however. The Bible emphasizes that members of the new kingdom community have a higher loyalty. Caesar is not lord; Jesus is Lord.

In the kingdom, people are always more important than possessions. Persons who were created by God in His image, and for whom Christ died that they may be redeemed, are always more valuable than property. Citizens of the kingdom do not insist on legal rights. They surrender personal property. For followers of Jesus, defending personal property (which belongs to God anyway) with lethal force is wrong, and represents a misplaced value system.

Article 13 specifically addresses issues of war and international conflict. Most conflicts, however are closer to home.

Marriage and Family Issues

It is time for the church to break the silence concerning violence in marriage and in families. Discipline of children should never leave scars or bruises, whether physical or emotional. The biblical teaching of mutual submission in marriage may never be used as an excuse for physical or emotional abuse. Most churches recognize that violence is grounds for marriage separation, at least on a temporary basis, until the aggressor has found constructive ways of managing anger.

The church must listen to and be an advocate on behalf of victims. It must hold abusers accountable. More than that, the church must teach and model peaceful ways of living as marriage partners and as families.

A related issue is violence to unborn children. It is hardly possible to be pro-peace without being pro-life as well. If we consider the life of our enemy to be sacred, we must also consider the life of the unborn to be sacred. In the same way, if we protect the life of the unborn, should we not also protect the lives of those who live in a country that our nation defines as its enemy?

Church

Surely the church is called to be a community of peace, providing an arena where the healthy exchange of differences is encouraged, supported, and resolved. Unfortunately, the church has too frequently been the place of bitter disputes and hurtful battles, harming its witness to the world.

Jesus taught that those coming to worship should first ensure that relationships with others are reconciled (Matthew 5:23, 24). Before approaching the Lord's Table, we examine ourselves, seeking to determine whether our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters are open and clear (1 Corinthians 11:27-34). In the past, some churches established peace committees designed to help fellow members resolve disputes—a decision which stands in contrast to our prevailing tendency to “mind our own business.” When we disagree within the Christian community, we should strive to do so as graciously as possible (Romans 14).

Community, School, Work, and Play

Neighbourhood disputes, racial tensions, and crime all provide further opportunities to promote justice, fight prejudice, extend love, work for peace. Community-based mediation services such as the Victim/Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) offer people an opportunity to practice peacemaking by bringing people together, allowing for restitution, and moving toward reconciliation.

Schoolyard fights, labour/management tensions, and violence among sports players and fans are all variations on the same theme and give Christians

many opportunities to work for peace. For example, some schools have established playground reconciliation teams, where students are trained to negotiate (and, if necessary, arbitrate) settlements among their peers.

In the workplace, we give employers and employees their due, and attempt to build bridges of trust and understanding. Truth, fairness, consideration, courtesy, and a love for others, even when we disagree with their positions, should mark the Christian's involvement in work-related disputes.

Christians should be encouraged to practice discernment in their entertainment choices. Television shows, movies, and computer games that glorify violence as a solution to problems stand in opposition to the way of the kingdom. In sports, vigorous yet friendly competition honours a worthy opponent. Insulting the referee or trash-talking the opposing team is not the way of Jesus. Our enthusiasm for the game is always tempered by our concern for the well-being of others.

National and International Disputes

For the Christian citizen, national and international disputes challenge a commitment to peacemaking. The present-day dilemma of trying to keep the peace by the threat of force seems counter to Jesus' words of love for enemies.

We deplore our world's tendency to deal with violence by threatening or committing counter-violence. Such acts generally result in an uneasy truce or cease-fire, an escalation of the violence, or the displacement of the violence into underground forms of terrorism. Reconciliation, on the other hand, eliminates enmity and hate, and cuts the root that feeds the violence by building bridges of understanding, forgiveness, and friendship. It is a huge task, but far more productive in the long run.

We are grateful to God that governing authorities in North America have provided alternative service for Christians who, because of their faith convictions, choose not to enter military service. The church should continue to counsel youth to offer themselves in loving service to reduce strife and alleviate suffering rather than take up arms in military conflict. The church should also continue to provide service opportunities where believers may bear witness to the love we have for all humanity, even our enemies.

What about those who accuse us of benefiting from the sacrifice of others, while refusing to get involved? What about veterans who believe they did the right thing, yet return from war with nightmares and tremendous feelings of guilt? What about members of our congregations who serve in police forces, where lethal force is sometimes expected in the line of duty?

Here the church will probably continue to live in tension between what we believe and the realities of life. Not all countries accept alternate service. Not all believers accept this teaching. As graciously as possible, let us agree to

disagree with those who hold different views. Let us be faithful in proclaiming the gospel in its fullness. This includes calling people to suffer for the sake of Christ and to extend love to those who seem unlovable.

At the same time, we extend grace and acceptance, love and support to those among us who disagree with us, or who find themselves making difficult decisions in their line of work.

Remembrance Day, Veteran's Day

We do not take lightly the sacrifice paid by others in wars in which we were unwilling to participate. Surely we would be ungrateful if we did not recognize and honour their struggle for peace. To remember and to pay tribute to their courage and commitment is certainly appropriate. There is no shame, however, in insisting that our weapons for peace are of another nature. Were we to stand idly by, doing nothing while others are fighting, surely that would be shameful. We are not called to do nothing, however; we are called to active peacemaking. Christ calls us to lay down our lives daily for the sake of the gospel of peace. Our willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom should certainly be no less than those who have given their lives fighting for their country.

A High Calling

Though there may be disagreement surrounding certain aspects of Article 13, perhaps the greatest need in these issues is not more understanding but more obedience. At the heart, Article 13 calls for Christians to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Jesus said his followers must “take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24 NRSV). He proclaimed, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9 NRSV). There is no higher calling.

One of the most powerful ways to teach the principles of love and nonresistance, of peace and nonviolence, is by telling stories. Many from our congregations who have worked in missions, relief, inner city, reconciliation, and other such ministries can offer firsthand accounts and experiences in these areas. A variety of printed materials also exist that are suitable for varying ages and settings. Including such material in church libraries and discussing them in class and small group settings is highly recommended. The following bibliography lists several potential resources.

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