

## **Radical Peacemaking: Living with our Diversity**

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### **A call to radical peacemaking**

What exactly does it mean to be citizens of God's kingdom first, but also citizens of one of this world's nations? What exactly does it mean to follow the Prince of Peace in faithful discipleship and yet to work at protecting the innocent and promoting justice in a world where evil sometimes needs to be stopped with force? What does it mean to take the whole Bible seriously, the parts that call God's people to nonretaliation and nonviolence and also the parts where God is portrayed as a warrior and sometimes calls on God's people to be the army that God commands?

It should not surprise us if we do not see eye to eye on these questions. There have been diverse perspectives defended by theologians and believed by ordinary church members for a very long time. Most Anabaptists and Mennonites have for five centuries leaned towards one set of answers. Many within USMB churches no longer lean in that same direction.

Put simply, we can no longer honestly claim that a particular view on these issues is central to our actual current distinctive denominational identity. While there has always been a diversity of practice among Mennonite Brethren on this issue, we live in a day when that diversity is not only in our practice but in our convictions.

Things have changed. We may rejoice or lament that fact, but things have changed. We continue to be people who sometimes fall short of living up to our convictions. (That has not changed). What has changed is that our theological and ethical convictions on these issues are now far more diverse than they once were.

That is why we now need a study conference. That is why we need to do the hard work of exploring what it is that we agree on, where we can and must challenge one another and how we will bear witness to our calling as peacemakers, when we cannot always agree on what that involves.

Whatever position you personally hold, or that is defended within your congregation, you can be quite sure that there are reputable scholars who argue for that position and others who argue against it. That

does not make all positions equally correct. But it does complicate the task of sorting out which views we as a denomination can or should recognize as acceptable options within our faith family.

We have heard diverse views in the first four presentations of this consultation. And we have heard them at our table discussions and in our plenary conversations. Some of us are convinced that some use of lethal violence is sometimes justified, even for Christians. Others of us are convinced that practicing lethal violence can never be right for followers of Jesus. And that is just one of the crucial issues on which we disagree. Yet we are brothers and sisters in the body of Christ and in the family of US Mennonite Brethren churches. These are simply the facts and we need to deal with them. It is time to ask what we will do with our diversity.

My goal this afternoon is to call us to radical peacemaking, even while we continue to debate the issues on which we disagree. Beyond all doubt, Jesus calls us to be peacemakers. Beyond all doubt, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has made enormous contributions to the whole Christian church (especially in the last 50 years), sensitizing theologians, church leaders and countless Christian disciples to recognize that the gospel is a gospel of peace and that it must lead to a discipleship of peacemaking. I want to call us to continue to model and promote radical peacemaking, even while we disagree on what some implications of that call might be.

I want to present and defend two claims in this presentation. My first claim will surprise nobody, though the implications I will draw from it might surprise some of you. My second claim will probably surprise a lot of you, but I am convinced that understanding and accepting it will go a long way in helping us get along, despite our diverse convictions.

My first claim is very simple to articulate, though I want to introduce it gradually. My second claim is more complicated, but I will try my best to explain it clearly before I call us to work out its implications.

### **What options did we have?**

In order to prepare for my first point, I want to ask you to participate in a short exercise. I sometimes use this in my seminary classes and it helps get the issues on the table.

Please take a pen and paper and be prepared to write down as many answers to a question as you can in 20 seconds. You will have only 20 seconds. You will not be asked to defend your answers. So write down as many answers as you can, even if you don't think they are very good answers. As soon as we are all ready, I will give you the question.

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, what options did we have?

Now, look at your answers. Based on what you wrote down, how many of you assumed the question was: What options did we as a country have? How many of you assumed the question was: What options did we as a Christian church have?

If you thought I was asking about America, you are in good company. Almost every seminary student who has done this exercise with me has assumed the same.

And I think that is a very, very large problem!

There was nothing in my preamble that signaled we were now going to change topics -- from what Christians should believe and do to what a country should believe and do.

Can you imagine what would happen to our reading of the New Testament, if, every time the apostle Paul wrote to a church and used the pronoun "we" the reader of the text would assume he meant "we Roman citizens" or "we the Empire" instead of "we followers of Jesus" or "we the Christian community."

To ask and answer the question of what options the United States had on Sept. 11, 2001, was and is an important question -- one to which we as followers of Jesus also should speak. But to ask and answer the question of what options we as Christians had has to be a far more important question for us. To switch those priorities is to make a very serious mistake. And to imagine that those are the same question is worst mistake we can make

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If national interest matters more to us than faithful discipleship, we have walked away from the kingdom of God. If our identity is "American first" and "Christian second" we have denied Jesus. If our highest moral imperative is derived from a constitution or decisions made by the government or the Supreme Court, we have turned our backs on the lordship of Christ. I am not suggesting that if you assumed my question was about American options, then you are doing all those things. But I think that if we do not model a clarity about these things, we run a great risk of filling our churches with patriotic Americans who haven't really encountered the radically countercultural, peacemaking Jesus to whom we must pledge our allegiance and whom we are called to follow.

### **Jesus must remain Lord**

That was my introduction: The first of my two claims this afternoon is this: For Christians, Jesus must always remain Lord over all competing authorities and priorities. Always!

Those of us who are convinced that Christians should not participate in violent action to promote justice and protection may do so for a variety of reasons. But unless that conviction is ultimately grounded in the confession that Jesus is Lord, it is not a Christian position. Those of us who are convinced that Christians can or even should be involved in peacekeeping roles that do require violent interventions, might also do so for a variety of reasons. But unless that conviction is grounded in the confession that Jesus is Lord, it is not a Christian position.

If you are the person to whom the responsibility falls (or fell) to press the button that releases the missile designed to blow up a munitions depot in Libya, knowing full well it might claim innocent lives in collateral damage, then you had better press that button if and only if you are convinced that this is an implication of your confession that Jesus is Lord, or it is not a Christian position. If you do it merely because you are a patriotic American, then that is all it means; it means that you are a patriotic American. It does not mean you are acting Christian. God help us if we don't know the difference between those two things!

I remember an interview that became an incredibly important “Aha moment” for me. It happened to be an interview with the first woman ever to reach a level of active engagement in American military operations, where it was her call to push the button that released a missile aimed at Bagdad. (This was during the first Gulf War, Jan., 1991.) After the interviewer tried desperately but in vain to sensationalize the story and make it about gender, the journalist closed the interview with one last question: The question went like this. “When your day’s duty is done, when you’ve sent a half dozen or so missiles toward Bagdad, and when you then lie in bed at night and think about the war and your role in it, in the wee hours of the night when you are having a hard time falling asleep, do you ever wonder what happens at the other end of those missiles, who has been widowed or orphaned because of it? Do you think about that?” The interviewee responded without hesitation and without emotion. And I’m sure she made her commanding officer proud. She said simply this: “No. It is not up to me to think about whether it is right or wrong. Somebody else pays attention to that! I just do my job.”

That was the day something became very clear to me. I have no idea whether that woman claimed to be a Christian. If she was, I have no idea whether her basic convictions were learned from her pastor or through her military training. But one thing became very clear to me that day. She had just articulated the core, the very essence, of a truly “non-Christian” response. She had declared her willingness to blindly follow the instructions, however right or wrong, of a human commanding officer.

I am not saying she should not have pushed that button. I am saying that if a Christian pushes the button, it must be because the lordship of Jesus justifies it, not because a military chain of command justifies it. For Christians, Jesus’ lordship always trumps all other obligations. When human authorities command us,

we submit those demands to the lordship of Jesus. If the commands are consistent with Jesus' lordship, we obey human authorities "for Jesus sake." If they are not, we disobey human authorities "for Jesus' sake." We never, ever get to say, "Somebody else worries about whether this is right or wrong. I just do my job." Not as a Christian. Not ever! Not in the military. Not anywhere. Not in any relationship. If my academic dean requires something of me or if the president of the university requires something of me, I do it. But I do it, not because Lynn or Pete are my moral authorities, but because Jesus is.

And if ever they were to require something of me that I could not reconcile with the lordship of Jesus, then I would have to refuse, even if I lost my job. And if a soldier is commanded to do something that he or she cannot reconcile with the lordship of Jesus, then they must refuse, even if it means being court martialed, dishonorably discharged or jailed. My great-grandfather was murdered in cold blood for refusing to obey the immoral command of a military officer. For him, Jesus was Lord and nobody else.

Christian soldiers: Be Christian soldiers only so long as it can be recognized as a valid expression of your Christian discipleship; patriotic duty, all by itself, is never enough to justify what soldiers are called to do.

### **An example from jury duty**

Almost a year ago I was summoned for jury duty. I would rather have avoided serving on a jury, but I felt a responsibility to do my civic duty. It was a complicated case, so jury selection stretched over days. Dozens of people were sent home because they had knowledge of, experiences with or prejudices about the subject of the case. As the judge asked probing questions, one after the other was excused from duty. I was 30th in line for possible jury duty, and I never suspected that before it was all over I would be sitting in the second jury seat.

Among the dozens of questions posed to prospective jurors one seemed purely routine and never resulted in anyone's disqualification. Over and over again, the judge asked prospective jurors: "Will you as a juror, agree that you will obey all of my instructions, even if you disagree with them?" Everybody routinely responded with self-evident agreement. Until the judge asked me that question. I did not raise my placard to signal that I would. I chose not to offer the judge my promise of unconditional obedience. The judge seemed stunned, and then he politely asked me to explain myself. I did, with an answer something like this:

"Your honor, I have high respect for the judiciary and the role of the judge. I also have high respect for you as a person. But you have asked me to agree in advance that I will do whatever you ask me to do, no matter what that is. I cannot promise you that. I cannot promise that to any judge or to any employer or to any president or to any emperor. I do not anticipate that you will ask me to do anything that I cannot do,

but to promise you in advance that if you would, I would do it anyway, is to ask me for a promise I cannot give.”

I could have said more, but it was not the time or place. The next morning I found myself duly sworn in as a member of that jury. I could serve with a good conscience, knowing I had preserved clarity about the main thing: Jesus is Lord.

I am not saying we always need to explain this to everyone. I have never written a letter to my dean or university president explaining that I will follow their instructions only if they are consistent with the lordship of Jesus. But the principle needs to be clear. Christians with professions that might require them to “shoot to kill” had better be clear about the fact that no other authority ever trumps the lordship of Jesus. If any lesser authority requires violent action, anything like patriotism or a law or a constitution or self-interest or even our own personal sense of justice, that is not good enough. Violent actions are justified by the lordship of Jesus or not at all.

There are many places where one could potentially draw a line in terms of what kind of violent actions might be considered consistent with Christian discipleship. Some say, I can endorse Christians in the role of armed police officers but not in the military. Others say, military participation in peacekeeping roles or in chaplaincy seems right for followers of Jesus but not in active combat. Others draw their line much farther from the place of action -- they don't invest in businesses with ties to the military, they avoid symbols of militarism or even patriotism. Others draw their line much closer to the place of action, supporting many kinds of military action or even “pushing the button.”

I think most of us would be hard-pressed to say exactly where we think that line should be drawn. And we certainly would not all agree on where. But I have become more and more convinced that the most fundamental issue that ultimately divides followers of Jesus from everyone else on this issue is not exactly where we draw that line, but whether or not “Jesus is Lord.” What Jesus requires of me will often overlap with, but must never be confused with, what my citizenship in this country requires or what my employment in this business requires or even what my membership in this church requires. Jesus' lordship is always the overriding consideration – always! And that is why we so desperately need each other to help us sort out these things. None of us could possibly have enough wisdom and clarity and courage to sort out these issues all alone. We need church communities committed to Jesus' lordship, committed to the Prince of Peace, committed to active peacemaking, to help us figure out which actions are consistent with that and which are not.

**But you don't understand**

And for those who respond: But you don't understand how the military works. You simply cannot reserve the right to disobey your commanding officer. To them I respond: I understand the military chain of command very well. That's been a huge factor in helping me decide where to draw my line. We don't all draw our lines in the same places. I understand that. But, please, don't ever say, "What line? It is not up to me to think about whether this is right or wrong! Somebody else pays attention to that! I just do my job!" If we assume that something is automatically right simply because it is in the American national interest or because it defends the American constitution or because a commanding officer tells us to do it, then we will have turned our backs on the lordship of Jesus and the kingship of God.

I have close friends who are armed police officers. I have good friends who have served in active military duty and would again. They are my brothers and sisters. We share a commitment to the lordship of Jesus. We are drawing our lines in different places. But we agree that Jesus is Lord. That is what we hold in common. I may wish all my students believed as I do, but I can't make that happen. I may wish all my fellow church members believed as I do, but I can't make that happen. I may wish that all the pastors in our denomination, all the members of the Board of Faith and Life believed as I do, but I can't make that happen.

Some of us in this room feel called to invest our best efforts trying to get others to draw the line where we do. I would rather invest my energies trying to convince all of us that the most crucial question of all is not precisely where we will draw the line, but whether we will or will not be willing to draw a line. If we collapse the lordship of Jesus into patriotism or national interest or self-defense or even the direct command from in authority over us, then we need to go back to square one and ask, Who is Lord? Jesus is Lord! I cannot enjoy Christian fellowship with fellow so-called "pacifists" for whom that doesn't matter. I can and do enjoy Christian fellowship with many so-called "nonpacifists" for whom the lordship of Jesus matters more than anything else in the world.

So, point one: Jesus is Lord. The implications of that might be more radical than some of us have imagined.

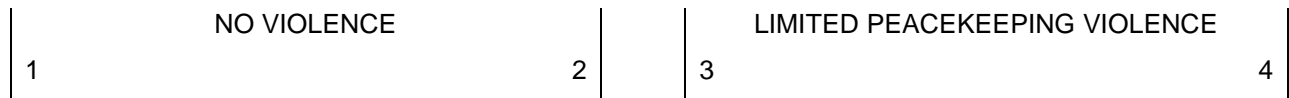
### **Not so far apart**

After all that, it should be easier to explain the otherwise complicated second claim.

My second claim is this: The distance that separates "the two sides" (the side that says followers of Jesus should never use violent force in the pursuit of peace and justice, and the side that says that there are times and places in this fallen world where violent force can and should be used, even by Christians, in

pursuit of peace and justice) is far smaller than the massive differences discernible on each side of the division between them. (I will try to explain what I mean.)

I know that a simple line graph does not do justice to the complexity of the issues. But if you will allow for the over-simplification, there is a far smaller difference between positions 2 and 3 than between positions 1 and 2 or between positions 3 and 4.



We often label the left half “pacifism” and the right half “just war defenders.” I don’t think either of those labels really captures what is at stake here. But more important than the titles is the claim I am trying to make.

My point is that some Christians who sincerely aim to centralize the lordship of Jesus locate themselves near 2 and some near 3. And these positions sometimes seem worlds apart. But in truth there is far larger diversity on both sides of them.

There are many Christians who have wrestled through to the tough decision that Jesus’ lordship requires them to respond to aggressors as Jesus did, with patient endurance, with prayers of blessing and forgiveness for the wrongdoers, with a conviction that even if they lose life and limb or their loved ones, they will not repay evil for evil, come what may. They are on “this” side of that line. And also on this side of that line are a host of pantheists and Buddhists and atheists and of all sorts. They might be nice people. They might contribute to world peace. But they are not my brothers and sisters in Christ. So-called “pacifists” are far more diverse than we sometimes imagine. And there are some Mennonites who are far more eager to protest against military installations than to follow Jesus in life. We may be on the same side of the central divide, but we are far, far apart.

The same is true on the other side. There are those who have wrestled through to the tough decision that Jesus’ lordship implies carefully considered limited use of violence to protect and create peace. I know people like that, and I will end this presentation by quoting one of them. And there are also those who rush off to the military because they love guns or hate foreigners or think it’s their best chance of getting a football scholarship. And they abandon their conscience to a higher commander officer, and sometimes they are misguided enough to believe they are promoting God’s kingdom simply by doing whatever benefits the United States. The so-called “nonpacifists” are also far more diverse than we sometimes imagine.



## **We must listen to each other**

We dare not paint everyone on the “other side” with the same brush and claim to be arguing against their views and for the truth, when in fact we are neither listening to what they are really saying nor addressing their true convictions.

If we can learn not to do that, I think we can make progress in talking across that gap and perhaps discovering that as long as the lordship of Jesus is kept at the center, that gap is smaller than we have assumed.

And then we can also make progress in talking with each other about the tough issues that “each side” needs to address.

I think many on “this side” of the line are so busy proving “those people” wrong that we don’t wrestle carefully with some really important questions on this side:

- Like what exactly do we mean when we say we should not ever use violence? Do we only mean we shouldn’t shoot to kill? Would we try our best to shove a would-be rapist out of our house (that could get violent), before bolting the door and calling the police? Does a commitment to nonviolence really mean all we can do is give the rapist a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name?
- Or like when do we avoid doing violence ourselves, but then call on those authorized to use it, to do so on our behalf, whether that be the armed police or the military?
- Or like when do we endorse military action if it is in fact not carried out for the sake of national self-interest but rather by a community of nations desperately working to prevent runaway genocide? How do we respond to the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) movement? It is a crucially important issue that, as far as I know, has only seriously been debated in the United Nations and in the Catholic Church. Most military conflicts today are not one nation declaring war on another, and so most of the older arguments about “just war” simply do not address a lot of the issues to be wrestled with today.
- On “this side” we often claim to espouse total nonviolence, when in face we often leave some pretty basic questions inadequately addressed, and we lose credibility because of it.

And many on “this side” of the line are too busy proving “those people” wrong, that they don’t wrestle carefully with some of the really important questions on this side:

- Like whether nationalism and patriotism have any legitimate place at all in Christian thinking. Our highest allegiance is to Jesus as Lord of the Universe, and our highest allegiance on earth is to his body, represented in all nations. Why then should “promoting national interest” ever justify anything for a Christian?
- Or like whether it really is a “Christian duty” to act as if this were a “Christian nation” or to use coercive politics to try to make it into one. Doing so only increases the risk that we will confuse “being Americans” with “being Christians” and that we then allow our culture and our nation to define right and wrong for us.
- On this side people often imagine we have a government and a judiciary and a constitution that are Christian enough to be a moral guide for Christians. Well, it is high time we wake up to the reality that our world dictates mostly non-Christian values and that perhaps the most fundamentally non-Christian of them all is that our most proper goal is the pursuit of “life, liberty and happiness.” Jesus did not live for that; why do we think we should?

We easily critique those on the other side of that central gap. But it is at least as important that we discern carefully as a Christian community where we stand on some of the crucial issues on our own side of the central divide. For only if we can do that well do we stand a chance of discerning together across that divide.

Way too often I hear people say, “Pacifism is simply wrong because . . .” (without ever exploring all the different kinds of pacifism they are lumping together). And also far too often I hear people say, “The use of violence is simply wrong because . . .” (without making any distinction between military aggression and protecting the vulnerable or, for that matter, carrying out terrorist attacks and stopping them).

### **Learning to be a peace church**

If we can get past the caricatures of the “other side,” if we can see clearly what can be quite un-Christian on “our side,” then we can learn together to be a peace church, even while we disagree on some ways this should be expressed.

The best thinkers and practitioners of peacemaking – and I am thinking of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Miroslav Volf and Glenn Staasson – cannot easily be pigeonholed by either side of this debate.

Rather they have been among those who have clearly seen the complexity of the issues and then helped call the church to peacemaking that is far more radical than simply saying “Yes” or “No” to a vaguely worded question about whether or not Christians should sometimes use limited violence to prevent greater violence.

Among us are many churches and many programs and many individuals working diligently and creatively on peace initiatives that heal marriages and reconcile enemies and manage church conflicts and promote justice and protect victims. My hope is that through the rest of this study conference we will be inspired by the peace initiatives around us. Maybe the bridges that need to be built across the divide will be more likely to happen as we work side by side to restore homes devastated by hurricanes or tsunamis, as we collaborate in welcoming refugees, as we break down walls of separation based on race or gender or socioeconomic status, as we serve the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters on both sides of international conflicts, as we feed the hungry, clothe the naked and give to the destitute.

The really crucial question that still remains to be processed at this conference is this: “How can we be deeply and passionately involved as peacemakers in our homes and churches and neighborhoods and cities, as followers of the Prince of Peace” -- and thus be known as a ‘peace church’ -- even while we disagree on whether sometimes violence needs to be a part of the picture, even for Christians?” Even though we have not reached agreement on the issues addressed so far, I hope and pray that we can work together on these other terribly important issues.

### **“I shall need it no more”**

I want to give the last word here this afternoon to a friend of mine who is on the other side of the line than I am. I have challenged him to join me on my side. He has challenged me to join him on his. At this point, we are on different sides. But we are brothers. And we respect each others’ choices and we recognize each others’ commitment to the lordship of Jesus.

With his permission, I quote from a paper he wrote in my seminary course.

*When I was a kid, I loved The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis. My favorite character was a mouse named Reepicheep – he was a brave, honorable, sword-wielding warrior. Near the end of the third book, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, the crew of the Dawn Treader arrives at Aslan’s Country. Reepicheep decides to remain there, never to return to Narnia again. As he says his final goodbyes to his traveling companions, he throws his sword into the ocean, stating, ‘I shall need it no more.’ This was a powerful image for me as a child, watching my favorite character*

*throw away his greatest asset – his ability to protect, defend and kill – as he entered the new kingdom.*

*Prior to being a seminary student, I was a full-time police officer employed by the Fresno Police Department. When I was sworn in, I made a promise to defend and uphold the Constitution of the United States, and I swore that if called upon, I would at a moment's notice lay my life down for the citizens of Fresno. Several days later, I went on patrol for the first time.*

*In my first week on the job, I witnessed more pain, suffering, tragedy, betrayal and evil than I had seen in my entire life leading up to that point. Every single day of my life from that point forward, I carried my sword and my shield (my gun and my badge) with me, on-duty and off-duty, confronting evil at every turn. Without question, my gun was my best friend; it saved my life and the lives of others on many occasions.*

*However, I distinctly remember longing and praying, so horribly badly, for the day in which I could lay down my weapon for good. I longed for the day in which there would be no more crying or pain, the day when all warriors . . . will be out of work, and I would be able to say, along with Reepicheep, 'I shall need it no more.'"*

Jesus chose against the sword already during his ministry. Many of us are longing for the day when we can do the same. And many of us are convinced that we can and should do that already. In the meantime, we are brothers and sisters learning together what it means to be kingdom citizens in a world of violence.

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