

CHURCH MISSION AND PEACEMAKING

POSITION PAPER

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“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18, NIV).¹

The Assemblies of God considers peacemaking to be intrinsic to the Church’s mission. Our “priority reason for being” is: (1) “To be an agency of God for evangelizing the world” (Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16); (2) “To be a corporate body in which man may worship God” (1 Corinthians 12:13); (3) “To be a channel of God’s purpose to build a body of saints being perfected in the image of His Son” (1 Corinthians 12:28; 14:12; Ephesians 4:11–16); and, (4) “To be a people who demonstrate God’s love and compassion for all the world” (Psalm 112:9; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; James 1:27).

Peace emanates from the very character of the Triune God who is “the God of peace” (Romans 15:33). The gospel therefore is “The gospel of peace” which is proclaimed in evangelism (Ephesians 6:15), pervades the relational context of authentic worship, provides an essential ethos for building the body of Christ, and is expressed and extended by demonstrating God’s love and compassion for the world. God’s ultimate design for His world and all its inhabitants is and has always been for them to be at peace with Him, themselves, each other, and His creation.

Peace Disrupted

At the beginning of the human story, Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect peace in four relationships. They were at peace with God, their personal self, each other, and God’s created order. Through these four relationships, God intended for humans to fulfill their purpose to worship and serve Him in a beautiful, hospitable, orderly, and peaceful world. However, when Adam and Eve yielded to temptation, followed their own desires, and rebelled against God, their sin damaged all four of these relationships, and humanity fell into depravity and strife. Thereafter, to this present time, and until Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom, fallen humanity has been, is, and will continue to be alienated from God, themselves, other people, and creation (Genesis 3:1–8). Peace is elusive where God’s Word and will are unknown or unheeded.

Hope for Peace Restored

In its most basic meaning, the word *peace* describes the quality of relationships. The Hebrew word *shalom*, usually translated “peace,” captures analogically what God’s peace is all about. It may best be understood as access to the “good life,” a life in which God’s good intentions for humanity are being realized. *Shalom* denotes the absence of conflict or war which is a necessary condition for human flourishing. But even more basically it speaks of harmony with God, oneself, one another, and God’s creation. *Shalom* therefore is a profoundly spiritual word, deeply rooted in the awareness that all blessings of life flow from God the Creator.

¹ All biblical citations unless otherwise indicated are from the New International Version (2011).

Its human and historical idealization is pictured in an oft-quoted passage from Israel's "golden age": "During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety (*betach*), everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25). But as the biblical record makes clear, Solomon's splendid and affluent kingdom by no means perfectly represented the mature *shalom* into which Israel's God desired to bring His ancient covenant people and indeed all humankind (Micah 4:4).

Though the people whom God created were all too soon and too willingly alienated, the promise of a final and perfect realization of *shalom* is nonetheless found throughout the Scriptures. Immediately following the Fall of our first parents is God's promise that the seed of the woman would one day defeat the deceiver (Genesis 3:15). This promise is followed by God's promise to Abraham and his descendents that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). Somewhat later God promises that the Messiah, a descendant of David, will come to establish a kingdom of peace throughout the earth (2 Samuel 7:12–13; 1 Kings 8:20; 1 Chronicles 17:11–14; Isaiah 9:6–7; 11:10–16).

These conditions are beautifully and powerfully depicted in the Old Testament prophets as a time when nations will no longer war against one another (Isaiah 2:4) and all creation is at peace (Isaiah 32:17–18). God's people will then finally have entered into the perfect *shalom* He intended from the beginning.

With righteousness he [the Branch, i.e., the Messiah] will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:4–9).

The New Testament continues this theme, often reflecting the language of the Old Testament prophets, and likewise declares that God's eternal kingdom (Psalm 145:13) of peace will be established on the earth. But it will only come at the end of this present age when Jesus Christ returns as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Revelation 19:11–16). The Revelation vividly depicts the arrival of a millennium, a thousand-year reign of peace (Revelation 20:4–10) which then gives way to the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21). It also describes the descent of the City of God at which time God comes eternally to dwell in righteousness and peace with His people (Revelation 21:1 through 22:5).

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death'

or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”
(Revelation 21:3–4)

Present Need for Peacemaking

Unfortunately, from the fall of Adam and Eve until the present, peace on our fallen planet has continued to be fragile indeed. Human history, to be sure, has its finer moments with the emergence of lofty ideals, many realized extensively in the history of our own and other nations, past and present. But unfortunately human history is also littered with the memories of wars, tyrannical and corrupt regimes, lawlessness, murder, slavery, even genocide. Far from our having evolved into a kinder, gentler world, the dawning of the twenty-first century is brimming with a simmering mix of ancient barbarities, militant religions, and godless philosophies that seem perennially to threaten whatever moral progress has been accomplished in previous generations.

Moral turbulence notwithstanding and with all the more reason, the Scriptures reiterate again and again the imperative of peacemaking for every generation. Dark ages and dark days are no reason for followers of Christ to cease faithful representation of the Prince of Peace! Even so, with all realism, the New Testament anticipates that turmoil will continue, and indeed increase as the end of the age approaches. In 2 Timothy 3:1–5, Paul predicts “terrible times” that will characterize many of the “last days.” Among his descriptors of human depravity are such terms as “lovers of themselves (selfish),” “unforgiving,” and “treacherous,” all of which specifically identify characteristics that militate against peace and justice and often corrupt humankind’s best intended efforts toward those ends. The Church in our time, and every time, has both the imperative and the challenge of pursuing peace and justice in societies often tumultuous and conflicted. Great revivals of Christian faith and morals have often turned the tide of human history, and that possibility is always with those who believe and act on their faith.

Biblical Directives for Peacemaking

The Scriptures are replete with directives to make peace in the midst of injustice and turmoil. The Psalmist proclaims: “Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14). The great writing prophets of the Old Testament severely condemned the dreadful social exploitation and injustice of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in their prosperous but declining years. Thus Amos confronted an outwardly religious but idolatrous and oppressive Israel:

Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream! (5:23–24).

Similarly, Isaiah shortly thereafter confronted Judah, also outwardly religious but publicly corrupted by injustice and idolatry:

Stop doing wrong.
Learn to do right;
seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow (1:16–17).

As we know very well, for the most part those appeals fell on deaf ears, and both nations continued their blind march to disintegration and exile.

By the time of Jesus, God's people were no longer a theocracy ruled by a Davidic king, but a vassal state ruled by tyrannical Rome. In that oppressive setting, with the Jewish people seething with resentment and revolt, Jesus yet preaches the prophetic message, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Paul writes, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:17–18). Later in the same epistle he urges, "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Romans 14:19). The author of Hebrews commands: "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy" (Hebrews 12:14). James promises, "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18).

When Jesus blesses those who make peace (Matthew 5:9), He is challenging and encouraging His followers to actively promote the restoration of relationships. To believers deeply involved in the life of local congregations, Paul writes, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). This is an exhortation rarely heeded in fractious congregations and communities! Nonetheless, peacemaking and peacekeeping are a vital part of the "ministry of reconciliation" that God has given to us through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18).

It is inspiring to remember that these exhortations first came to believers striving to be peacemakers under far more dangerous and difficult conditions than exist in advanced modern societies. But even today, there are many places in our world where extremely dangerous conditions threaten the very lives, not to mention the peacemaking efforts of believers. Certainly, for those of us who are free and uniquely empowered to bring reconciliation and hope to various communities at home and abroad, the imperative for peacemaking is inescapable.

Biblical Means of Achieving Peace

As we have repeatedly emphasized, genuine peace comes only from and through God who is the wellspring of peacemaking. As Paul notes (Romans 4:5; 5:6), God has taken the first step of peacemaking by offering redemption through Jesus Christ, whereby we have "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). This includes personal and experiential peace: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). Jesus further personalizes it declaring that He is the One who gives peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (John 14:27). Taking this reconciling gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15) to others in turn is the first and most basic means of peacemaking (Matthew 5:9).

Beyond sharing the gospel of peace, the Scriptures are not univocal regarding other means of accomplishing peace or addressing conflict. In the Old Testament, God's will for human behavior is epitomized in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:1–21) which are in turn distilled into two, love for God and love for neighbor (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37–40). If necessary, force is used to resolve conflicts. In the New Testament, there is more emphasis on accomplishing peace through nonviolent means. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advocates a nonviolent response to evil when He instructs us to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, or relinquish our shirts when sued for our coats. However, the

Scriptures strongly support conflict resolution as an appropriate method to obtain peace when one is wronged or has wronged another (Matthew 5:23–26; 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, Ephesians 2:14).

The New Testament also recognizes and affirms the role of government in peacemaking and peacekeeping. “The authorities that exist have been established by God” and are “God’s servant for your good.” These authorities “bear the sword” as “God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:1,4). While these biblical texts have no illusions about the moral impeccability of the authorities or their actual rule, it is clear that the divine mandate for government is to maintain justice and peace, and to defend against and punish evil.

Christians have an imperative not only to affirm their government’s role in peacekeeping but also as citizens to cast their ballots, raise their voices, and exert their influence to facilitate just and humane actions by their governing bodies as well as other social and commercial entities. Evangelical witness is always demonstrated as compassionate and peace-loving people thoughtfully and prayerfully examine their own prejudices, educate themselves on the great moral issues of the day, and engage in ways that bring glory to God and *shalom* to those who are oppressed and violated. Indeed, lawless and brutal behavior threatens the well-being and peace of society at large as well as particular individuals who are immediately abused by such destructive behaviors. Leaving the wounded unattended and unprotected alongside the highways of life may be excused by some religionists, but it is hardly the godly option for those called to be peacekeepers and peacemakers.

Assemblies of God Emphasis on Peacemaking

While the Scriptures place a great deal of responsibility for justice and peacemaking on leaders and government, the peacemaking imperative is also deeply and intensely personal—and must always have a personal starting point. One’s life-changing personal peace with God is to radiate outwardly in both effecting and maintaining peace in the family, with fellow believers, the immediate community, and among all the structures and ministries of the Church at home and abroad. As recipients of peace, believers are to exemplify, create, and maintain just and peaceful contexts in their various spheres of life and ministry.

For both personal and corporate engagement in peacemaking, the Assemblies of God provides a wide range of resources and missions opportunities. In addition to well-established and well-funded missions organizations at home and abroad, rationale and encouragement are provided in various perspective papers as those on capital punishment, counseling, environmental protection, and justice for women in society, and the church. In a perspective paper on human trafficking, holistic instructions are provided for churches to respond to this systemic injustice, including prayer, education awareness, speaking out against this atrocity, and personal ministry to victims. Also, clear justification and instruction are provided in a perspective paper on civil disobedience that encourages nonviolence as the appropriate response to counter social evils. Another example is found in Resolution 9 of the 1989 General Council, which states: “The General Council . . . approves participation in the pro-life movement by all scriptural means and disapproves all unscriptural acts by its ministers; and leaves to the discretion of individual ministers the extent to which they may participate in nonviolent and peaceful acts of intervention to prevent the ‘killing of the unborn.’”

The Assemblies of God's position on war must be clarified in any discussion of peacemaking. The official perspective paper on war and conscientious objection makes it clear that, "The Assemblies of God as a Movement deplores war. Therefore we are committed to its avoidance as much as accountability, sensibility, and responsibility allow. This will be the necessary posture, until the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, establishes His reign over a world that is now characterized by violence, wickedness, and war." At the same time, this perspective paper goes on to cite Article XVII of the Church's Bylaws which makes it clear that the Church is not pacifistic: "We shall continue to insist, as we have historically, on the right of each member to choose whether to declare their position as a combatant [one who willingly serves in positions of violence], a noncombatant [one who serves only in nonviolent ways], or a conscientious objector [one who refuses to participate in any form of military service because of personal convictions regarding war]."

Moreover, the perspective paper also cites the following from Bylaws XVII: "As a Movement we affirm our loyalty to the government of the United States in war or peace." Thus, while respecting the freedom of conscience of pacifists and encouraging their proper pursuit of peacemaking, the Assemblies of God also recognizes biblical authorization of police and military power for the safety and security of the country (Romans 13:1-5). Given these commitments, it is possible for believers of whatever persuasion in times of armed conflict to effectively serve as peacemakers in a place and role of their conscientious choice.

Evangelism and Peacemaking

In view of the admonitions of Scripture to pursue peace in a broken world, the importance and relevance of deliberate peacemaking activities is abundantly clear. In keeping with its inclusion of compassion ministries in its "priority reason for being" statements, the Assemblies of God, as noted, provides encouragement and opportunities for its members to be proactive in peacemaking. As people of the Spirit, we have seen again and again the way in which God raises up gifted believers to spearhead the formation of powerful peacemaking ministries at home and abroad. Examples readily come to mind, as Teen Challenge, Convoy of Hope, military and civilian chaplaincy ministries, and many others local, national, and international.

Unfortunately, history also reveals that at times individuals and churches, even entire denominations, make social justice and peacemaking activities their primary mission. Not uncommonly, these well-intentioned transformation movements that began with lofty Christian ideals are co-opted along the way by political or ideological interests and lose their moorings in the gospel of Christ. Unwittingly, they may even become a part of the oppressive systemic structures they initially set out to reform.

That being true, the emphasis and function of peacemaking and other social ministries must always be kept in proper relationship to the Church's core mission to evangelize and make disciples of Jesus Christ. While ministries of compassion, social transformation, and peacemaking that truly grow out of and retain their vital connection to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ do indeed extend the mission of our God in His world, there must be a determined effort to stay on mission.

From its beginning in 1914, the Assemblies of God's main focus of ministry has been, and continues to be, worldwide evangelism and discipleship. This priority is drawn from the overall thrust of the New Testament and especially from the Lord's final command: "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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20).

Conclusion

While evangelism and discipleship must always be the foremost task of the Church, the people of God cannot stand aside from the social evils and injustices of our time, about which the Bible speaks so powerfully. As we preach the gospel of peace about the miracle-working, life-giving Prince of Peace, we must be alert to the brokenness and systemic evils of the world around those to whom we minister. If we are prayerful and willing, our Lord by His Spirit will lead us through all our ministries to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), to help the needy (Matthew 25:35–36), and to minister in love and compassion endeavoring to obey everything He commanded.