

**AMERICAN BAPTIST  
POLICY STATEMENT ON PEACE**

**Biblical/Theological Basis**

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid (John 14:2).

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God (Matthew 5:9).

God created the universe and called it "good." As a part of the good creation, God called humanity to be partners in creation with God. God set the creation free and the process of freedom is moving toward the day when all will be complete and the kingdom of God will be fully established. As God's partners, gifted with freedom, humanity finds itself given the responsibility of the stewardship of the good earth and its people.

God created the universe at peace. Peace was God's intention for the creation. Paul D. Hanson has written:

If one were to choose a single word to describe the reality for which God created the world and in which He seeks to sustain the community of those who respond to His grace as an invitation to participate in it, that word would be "shalom."<sup>1</sup>

Health, wholeness, well-being, harmony, and peace are all inherent in the Hebrew word "shalom." The New Testament, by the use of the Greek word "eirene," continues the same understanding. Thus, when Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," he was calling upon all the tradition to direct the believers to be the makers of peace, harmony, health, well-being, and community.

Since peace was God's intention for the creation, why is there no peace? James 4:2 observes, "You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war." It can then be said that war is caused by "want." On the one hand, there is covetous want which the Bible calls sins. On the other hand, there is the legitimate want for basic human needs and freedom. Thus, the Bible asserts that the believer is compelled to share with his/her neighbor (Matthew 25:35 ff.).

First, covetous want is the case for the absence of peace. David Augsberger and Manfred Brauch have given this definition of sin: "Sin is my choice to live over others in dominance; or despite others in rejection and unconcern; or apart from others in flight, withdrawal and separation; or under others in submission, making others my gods; or without others in isolation; or against others in hostility and prejudice; rather than with others in truth and love."<sup>2</sup>

Since, therefore, God called us to live with God and others in truth and love, any action which violates that intention of creation is sin.

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<sup>1</sup> "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible" by Paul D. Hanson, Interpretation, A Journal of Bible and Theology, October 1984, page 341.

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished lecture notes, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Israel was called from its inception as a nation to the task of working with God to redeem God's good but fallen creation to help create "shalom." As was suggested earlier, a translation of this word which limits the substance of "shalom" to merely peace is too narrow. Scholars have suggested the following elements are contained in the concept of "shalom":

1. A reconciled relationship with God;
2. An active, ongoing relationship between people in community;
3. A constant creativeness of new possibilities;
4. A fulfillment of the variety of potentials of persons within a community;
5. The resolution of destructive conflict by positive, constructive activity;
6. The liberation of oppressed groups;
7. The preservation and enrichment of the environment; and
8. A general sense of individual and community well-being.

As can be seen, "shalom" is relational. Much more than the absence of conflict, it connotes harmony, health, wholeness and well-being in all relationships.

Micah 6:8 outlines the fact that to be faithful is to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Liberty and justice become inseparably linked with peace. In fact there is the affirmation of the text that there is no peace without the presence of justice. The Bible illustrates at least three forms of justice:

1. Attributive justice which claims privileges to persons by virtue of their status or position (basic human rights) (Genesis 1:26-29),
2. Retributive justice which reestablishes a balance caused by some sort of injurious imbalance (Romans 13), and
3. Distributive justice which is concerned with the fair distribution of a community's resources -- that all may have enough (Luke 4:19; Leviticus 25:8 ff.).

In the New Testament, this same concern which is described as peace and justice in the Old Testament is described by the use of such terms as salvation, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. The coming kingdom of God for which we hope and long has been that for which Moses and the prophets yearned and wept in the bondage of Egypt and Babylon and within the turbulence and corruption of Israel and Judah. The coming of Christ proclaiming the kingdom rekindled in many the vision of a "shalom" community made possible for all persons. The birth of Jesus was announced with the proclamation "Peace on Earth." This announcement was not made to the rich and powerful, but to the shepherds, whose social standing was not highly regarded. Therefore, it is evident from the beginning of his life on earth that the "Prince of Peace" chose to identify with the powerless. His homeland and people had been subjugated and humiliated for most of their long history.

Jesus' ministry, beginning with the reading from the Isaiah scroll in Nazareth, declared him the chosen bearer of the good news, the gospel of

forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness from God for the human condition and sinful actions and reconciliation with God and with humanity was made possible in the ministry, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This good news, the gospel of peace was committed to the empowerment of the captive and oppressed (Luke 4:16-21). Of those who would follow, Jesus demanded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and all your mind...you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39 NRSV).

As James 4 observes sin, covetous want is a cause of war, killing and the absence of "shalom." God has called people through the ministry of Israel and the coming of Jesus to repent of their sinful desires. Ultimately God's rule is among nations who will turn the instruments of warfare into instruments of "shalom," plows and pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:4). Jesus commissioned the disciples to "make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you..." Matthew 28:19-20 NRSV).

It is not enough, however, to assert that all "want" is covetous. There is much need in this world. There are hungry, homeless and oppressed persons who are entitled to the basic needs of life. All nations and people are entitled to peace and justice. Where there is the deprivation of basic human needs and the perception of the presence of a group that has what is needed and more, there is the potential for revolt and war. The "haves" may become assaulted by the "have nots."

William Herzog has suggested that the antithesis of peace is dehumanization. Dehumanization is the root problem of the human species (i.e. sin), and its expressions inevitably entail violence and oppression. Stated positively, one can only extend "shalom" to those one trusts. Trusting involves viewing another as an equal who deserves peace.<sup>3</sup>

The American Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter, "The Challenge of Peace", states, "No society can live in peace with itself or with the world without a full awareness of the worth and dignity of every human person and of the sacredness of all human life (James 4:1-2). When we accept violence in any form as commonplace, our sensitivities become dulled. When we accept violence, war itself can be taken for granted. Violence has many faces; oppression of the poor, deprivation of basic human rights, economic exploitation, sexual exploitation and pornography, neglect or abuse of the aged and the helpless, and innumerable other acts of inhumanity."<sup>4</sup>

Today's society has been described as being violent and as becoming more and more polarized and dehumanized. Our world, the "neighborhood" in which we live, has become fragmented -- separated by walls, fences, ghettos, prisons, missile silos, and other barriers which mar the beauty of the Creator's world and obstruct the path to "shalom." The Church is called to recognize Christ's work of peacemaking, which includes tearing down walls of separation (Ephesians 2:14 ff.) and building from the rubble upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

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<sup>3</sup> Unpublished paper by William Herzog presented to the Task Force on the Policy Statement on Peace.

<sup>4</sup> The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response, A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace," May 3, 1983, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, page 88, paragraph 285.

The church as a growing, caring community witnesses to the hope that although desired wholeness has not yet been achieved, the journey toward peace, justice and the kingdom of God is in progress. Worship and celebration serve to strengthen, sustain and encourage the gathered body and to keep alive the prophetic life that sees swords being beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

The Christian peacemaker is called to be the facilitator of reconciliation, the agent of sharing human wealth and resources, and the evangel of repentance and salvation. These are all peacemaking elements. In addition, the Christian peacemaker bears the message of hope. With repentance there is hope. With food and other basic human needs there is hope. With reconciliation and restoration between persons and nations there is hope. In the reality of a transcendent God who breaks down the dividing walls of hostility there is hope. In knowing that all history is moving toward God and will ultimately consummate in God there is hope. There is hope looking into God's future. Where vision born of prophetic insight fails, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18).

### **Historical Overview**

Historically, Christian churches have taken three primary positions with regard to the morality of war. Some Christians, including but not limited to those in the historic peace churches (Mennonites, Brethren and Friends), have adopted a pacifist position believing that faithfulness to Jesus Christ precludes engaging in any kind of violence, including war. Since there is no evidence of Christians participating in military activities until around 170 A.D., it is often argued that pacifism was the position of the early church.<sup>5</sup>

A second position adopted by some Christians is the crusading tradition. A crusade is a holy war fought on God's behalf for a divine cause.<sup>6</sup> For these Christians, God is seen as a Warrior God. This position, adopted by the church before the Middle Ages, is still held by some Christians. The holy cause promoted by the crusaders does not induce restraint in waging war, but rather encourages violence.

The just war theory, the third position taken by some Christians, seeks to limit the number of wars fought, to minimize the destruction occurring in war, and to allow Christians to participate provided the war meets certain criteria. The criteria for war to be considered just includes: a just cause, waged by legitimate authority; discrimination between combatants and noncombatants; use of war as a last resort to settle a dispute; destruction which is proportionate to the good sought; and a reasonable expectation for success.

Even though within American Baptist Churches there are representatives of all three of these positions, the most prevalent position taken by American Baptists seems to be some form of just war thinking. War, though it is evil, may be unavoidable and may be fought to prevent an even greater evil from occurring. The just war doctrine grew out of an attempt to limit the frequency and scope of war. Critics argue, however, by allowing Christians to participate in war, the doctrine actually encourages leaders to use war as a

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<sup>5</sup> Roland H. Bainton, Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation, page 71.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pages 44-45

means to carry out policy. Essentially, the burden of proof for applying the criteria so that a war could be considered a "just war" shifted from those who would seek war to those who sought to restrain war. Consequently, the criteria for involvement in a war, of prosecution of the war after it has begun, have not been applied.

Some Christians, most notably the U.S. Catholic Bishops in writing their Pastoral Letter on Peace, have found it helpful to apply just war criteria in thinking about nuclear war. The Bishops say the use of nuclear weapons is prohibited by just war criteria because the destruction involved in a nuclear war is likely to be both disproportionate to the good sought and indiscriminate in its destruction of combatants and noncombatants. Other Christians suggest that the potential for nuclear war is so great that any war, because it might lead to a nuclear war, is unjust.

Historically, American Baptists have been noted for their commitment to peace. They represent several traditions of thought and have grappled with war and peace issues from their own distinctive positions. Among the well-known Baptist peacemakers are Harry Emerson Fosdick, Edwin T. Dahlberg, Harold Stassen, Mable Martin, Zelma George and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The traditions are diverse and powerful, each seeking to promote God's will for peace and justice. Christians in our times must learn the truth of Martin Luther King's remark, "The choice for us is no longer between violence and nonviolence, it is between nonviolence and nonexistence."

### **Situation Analysis**

We live in a world marked by promise and peril. It is a world urgently in need of peace, reconciliation and the wholeness referred to in the biblical concept of peace.

The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe brought to an end the Cold War era in which the superpower confrontation between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R raised the threat of nuclear holocaust. The Cold War raged hot in numerous regional conflicts where global ideological struggle overlay conflicts with other regions. When the Cold War ended many thought that peace was breaking out, but the slaughter of war continued in the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Bosnia, Chechnya, Rwanda, Liberia, Columbia and Burma.

With the removal of the ideological struggle between the superpowers, old nationalist and ethnic issues have erupted, often in the context of boundaries and nation-state identities created by colonial powers from earlier eras. Movements of people and the passing of the years have led to communities and countries with mixed populations. In the wake of the break-up of old power blocks, many politicians have appealed to nationalist, ethnic and religious particularities to build up their own power bases and find scapegoats for the problems of their societies. This has led to polarization at the most intimate levels and conflicts which have erupted with horrifying ferocity. "Ethnic cleansing," which has become the new phrase to describe all the too common phenomenon of genocide, has been employed frequently by one group against another.

A key component of many of these conflicts is economic inequity. The gap between the rich nations and poor nations has increased, as have the gaps between the rich and the poor within many nations. The richest fifth of the world's people have 84.7% of the world's Gross National Product, while the poorest fifth have only 1.4%.<sup>7</sup> Such disparity increases the desperation of

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations Development Fund, 1991, Hunger 1995: Causes of Hunger, Bread for the World,

the have-not's, creating a politically and socially volatile situation ripe for violence.

Manufacturers and dealers of armaments have turned to these brewing conflicts to maintain the production and profit levels which have been threatened by the ending of the Cold War race. The glut of weapons, the priority that governments of developing countries put on arms purchases, the stockpiles leftover from the Cold War, and the continued marketing by government-supported manufacturers in industrialized countries, continually add fuel to the conflagrations.

War always leaves humans suffering in its wake, and the proliferation of the nationalist, ethnic and separatist wars has produced a dramatic increase in refugees and displaced persons. By the end of 1994 there were over 16 million refugees and an estimated 26 million internally displaced persons.<sup>8</sup> The frequency and scale of humanitarian disasters is being aggravated by rising "donor fatigue" as people and nations tire of giving and numb themselves to the plight of war victims.

The nuclear threat still exists. While tensions between the superpowers have diminished, vast stockpiles of nuclear weapons still exist. Shifting internal politics or international relations could sour relations again and renew nuclear politics. Proliferation is still a concern as illustrated in the weapons programs of Pakistan, India, Iraq and North Korea. Nuclear materials have disappeared in the confusion of the breakup of the Soviet Union, providing even more substance to the concern regarding the use of nuclear devices by terrorist groups. Arms control and limited disarmament agreements have helped create less tense relations among the major powers, but periodic crises show how tenuous arms control efforts still are.

A key component of peacemaking efforts has been the development of intergovernmental agencies and international law. International conventions, law and the International Court of Justice have made progress in expressing values about human rights and self-determination, creating a basis for nonviolent resolution of many conflicts. The United Nations system and regional intergovernmental organizations have provided forums for discussion of global problems and vehicles responding cooperatively to many of those problems. United Nations peacekeeping forces have served as trust-building buffers between opposing forces and provided a key ingredient to many peace initiatives. Though there have been many mistakes and failures along the way, the development of these cooperative international institutions and projects have provided humanity a resource for problem-solving and peace-building.

In the context of these chronic problems, Christians cannot rest in their response to Christ's call to peacemaking. The Christian community is compelled by its understanding of the gospel to seek peaceful solutions to international crises for the sake of the abundant life.

### **Policy/Principles**

The biblical concepts of peace and of peacemaking give Christians a unique understanding of the hope God has for us.

This hope becomes a basis for action in view of the continuing plague of war and violence as well as the still present threat of the use of nuclear

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1994, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> World Refugee Survey--1995, by U. S. Committee for Refugees, p. 42-44).

weapons. The United States, the former USSR and a growing number of other nations continue to build and rely on nuclear weapons; the threat of international violence grows.

In its commitment to its understanding of the gospel and its proclamation of the love of God for the world, the General Board of the American Baptist Churches supports efforts to work toward peace and justice in accordance with the following principles:

1. As believers in God who is able to do miraculous works, we call on all Christians to humble ourselves, acknowledge our limitations and earnestly seek God's interventions in areas needing peace and justice.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be peacemakers, to live in right relationship with God and others, and to be active agents for reconciliation and justice.

2. As Christians we will constantly seek, through the resources of faith, prayer and scriptures, to struggle with the issues of peacemaking in the contemporary context. We will express to our church community, to the wider society and to governments the understandings that the insights of our Christian faith and experience bring to issues related to peace.
3. We share our common humanity with all of humankind, and all must work together if peace is to be secured. Even if our disputes with others are severe and deep, we will strive to value our opponents as human beings and will seek by all peaceful means to resolve disputes and to break down the walls of hostility between us.
4. As members of the Christian family we have relationships with Christians in many countries. We will listen to what is said to us by those Christians and gain insights from them that will enable us to understand their countries better and a new perspective on our own country.
5. In working for peace we must cooperate with other religious ecumenical and secular groups who share our concerns and with whom we can work as we seek to implement the principles in this policy statement.
6. We affirm the United Nations and other international approaches to settling disputes and working with the problems of the world. We will persistently seek alternatives to war as a means of settling international disputes.
7. We are common inheritors of the earth and we hold in trust the genetic material of future generations and the earth on which those generations will live. We declare that the use or development of weapons which would damage genes or render the earth or portions of it uninhabitable is a sin against present and future generations and must be opposed.
8. We call on all nations to abolish their nuclear weapons and to dispose of such weapons in a manner that is not harmful to either the physical or political environment.
9. We will support the redirection of resources in all nations from armaments to programs that will: (a) enable people to have the skills and resources to meet their own needs; and (b) enable countries to

build a strong infrastructure as a just and equitable basis for a stable society.

We recognize that seeking to be peacemakers can be costly, personally and institutionally. We will seek to base our actions on a strong theological foundation, to interpret our positions clearly, to take time to acquaint ourselves with different positions, and always to respect and value those who differ from us.

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