

# Biblical Basis for Peacemaking

The Bible witnesses to the centrality of peacemaking for Christian discipleship in three ways. First, the word “peace”—*shalom* in Hebrew and *eirene* in Greek—is widely used in the Bible and has a wealth of meaning. It is through exploring the uses of the word “peace” in the Bible that we come to an understanding of the meaning of peace and peacemaking. Second, the visions and stories of the Bible offer models for the transformation of individuals and communities into peacemakers. It is through wrestling with these stories and making them our own that we grow as disciples of the Prince of Peace. Third, the entire biblical story shapes our calling to be peacemakers. It is through reflecting on the themes of the biblical witness as a whole that one is confronted by the significance of peace and peacemaking for thinking about God, God’s work in the world, and God’s intention for human persons, communities, and creation.

## I. Biblical Meanings of “Peace”

A. The Hebrew word *shalom* includes ideas expressed by such English words as peace, well-being, wholeness or health, welfare, prosperity, and safety.

1. Shalom is God’s gift (Lev. 26:6; Num. 6:26; 1 Kings 2:33; Ps. 29:11, 85:8, 147:14; Isa. 26:3–12) and God’s intention (Jer. 29:11). The fulfillment of God’s purpose for creation is described as a covenant of shalom (Num. 25:12; Isa. 54:10; Ezek. 34:25–31, 37:26). Within this covenant relationship, people know God and live in community in which people and nature flourish. The Old Testament provides several visions of this fulfillment (Gen. 1:1–2, 4a; Ps. 46; Isa. 11:1–9, 58:6–12, 61:1–4, 65:17–25). Although given by God, shalom is not to be passively awaited but actively pursued (Ps. 34:14).
2. Shalom involves positive relationships between peoples and persons. In Gen. 28:21 Jacob looks forward to a time when he can

return home to his brother Esau in shalom. Judges and true judgments enable the people of Israel to live together in shalom (Exod. 18:23; Zech. 8:19). The unity of all nations worshipping God together is an important part of the vision of shalom in Isa. 2:2–4 and Micah 4:1–4.

3. Positive relationships within the community mean that the needs of all persons are met, and material well-being, economic security, and prosperity are available for all (Isa. 54:13, 66:12; Jer. 29:5–7; Ezek. 34:27–29; Ps. 37:11, 72:3; Hag. 2:9). For this to occur, righteousness must characterize the people and justice, the society (Isa. 9:6–7, 32:17, 59:8, 60:17; Jer. 8:10–11; Ps. 72:1–7, 85:10). There is no peace without justice.
  4. Shalom involves absence of war (Deut. 2:26; Josh. 9:15, 10:1, 4; Judg. 4:17; 2 Sam. 10:19; 1 Kings 5:12; 2 Kings 9:17–19; 1 Chron. 22:9). In the books of Joshua and Judges, victory in war is gained through God’s miraculous action, not human weapons. Isaiah (chapters 30–31) insists that Judah rely on God, not on the weapons and military might of Egypt. The expectation that in God’s kingdom swords will be beaten into plowshares (Isa. 2:2–4; Micah 4:1–4) looks forward to a time when resources will be poured not into military technology but into meeting basic human needs. In Lev. 26:6, Ps. 122:6–8, 2 Kings 20:19, and Esther 9:30, shalom goes beyond the absence of war to include security and the lack of fear.
  5. The full meaning of shalom can only be grasped when human well-being is balanced within the welfare of all creation (Isa. 11:1–9; Ezek. 34:17–31; Zech. 8:12; Job 5:23).
- B. The Greek word *eirene* means absence of war, but in the New Testament it includes all of the

meanings of shalom: good relationships among peoples and nations (Mark 9:50; Rom. 12:18–19; Eph. 2:15; Heb. 12:14), healthy relationships within the community (Acts 9:31; Rom. 14:19; 1 Cor. 14:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; Eph. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:13), a quality of life in the Spirit or in relation to God (Luke 1:79; Rom. 3:17, 14:17, 15:13 and 33, 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; 2 Thess. 3:16; Phil. 4:9; Eph. 4:3), a gift of Jesus (John 16:33; Col. 3:15), reconciliation effected by or through Jesus (Rom. 5:1; Phil. 4:7; Eph. 2:14–15 and 17; Col. 1:20), a greeting in letters, and a quality to be pursued by humans (Luke 19:42; James 3:18; 2 Tim. 2:22; 1 Peter 3:11; Heb. 12:14).

1. Pursuing peace does not mean avoiding conflict; indeed, it may cause conflict with forces opposing peace. The “Magnificat” (Luke 1:46–55) pictures the kind of peace Jesus brings, the kind that led to his crucifixion. Col. 1:19–20 affirms that it is only through this ultimate conflict that God makes peace, reconciling all things to God.
2. In Romans 5:1, Paul understands the reordering of relationships through Christ as peace with God. Peace with God brings reconciliation with other persons and communities of people (Eph. 2:13–18; Gal. 3:26–28). The primary phrase used by the gospels to talk about a world reconciled to God is the kingdom of God. Those who participate in this kingdom, who are children of God, are peacemakers (Matt. 5:9).

## II. Visions and Stories of Peace

Biblical visions and stories offer models for transforming areas of life that need conversion and renewal. The Rich Young Man (Mark 10:17–22), the Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:5–42), and the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16) offer models for transformation by calling us to confront and deny cultural definitions that separate us from our true identity as God’s creatures; that reinforce divisions within humankind along racial, ethnic, national, and economic lines; and that justify exploitation of natural and human resources for unjust ends. The Cain and Abel story (Gen. 4:1–16) challenges us to recognize the connection between our relationship to God and

to those close to us. The Mary and Martha story (Luke 10:38–42) calls us to question traditional role expectations.

## III. Peacemaking and the Biblical Story

The Bible begins with creation, God’s intention for harmony, wholeness. Brokenness is a result of human failure and pride. However, God does not give up on creation but promises renewal and restoration, culminating in the vision of shalom in Rev. 21:1—22:5.

Between creation and new creation is God’s work of salvation, reconciliation. A promise to Abraham and Sarah identifies God’s intention to relate to particular people. The Exodus identifies God as one who liberates the oppressed, who is involved in the concrete social, political, and economic lives of people in need. The covenant God makes with the people calls them to view their lives in relationship to God. The God who liberates demands a society based on mutuality, respect, righteousness, and justice. The God who has mercy requires kindness and compassion for all people. The God who is holy expects and empowers a holy people.

When the community fails, judgment follows. Exile is the inevitable consequence of the failure to trust in God and establish justice in community. Restoration and return reveal the extent to which God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Exod. 34:6).

The visions of the prophets find their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who embodies shalom, heals, teaches, empowers, reconciles, and brings the Kingdom of God into the lives of those who follow him. Jesus fulfills God’s intention for human life and demonstrates servanthood as the model for disciples. Through him God makes peace with humankind, within the human community, as symbolized by the church, and renews creation, thus establishing shalom. Believers are called to participate in God’s work of peacemaking.

—Dr. Peggy Parks Cowan, professor of religion at Maryville College and an elder at New Providence Presbyterian Church in Maryville, TN



Presbyterian Peacemaking Program  
General Assembly Mission Council

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# A Study Process for “Biblical Basis for Peacemaking”

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## Note to Facilitator

This study process assumes a one-hour format. It may be adapted to be longer or shorter.

## Goals

- To reflect on the biblical understanding of peace
- To consider how that understanding guides our peacemaking as followers of Jesus

## Materials

- Copies of the essay “Biblical Basis for Peacemaking” found in this resource
- Bibles
- A Christ candle and matches
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- *(Optional)* Pictures of peace and peacemaking taken from magazines, newspapers, and online

## Advance Preparation

- Read through the essay prayerfully.
- Read the Scripture passages cited in the essay.
- Read through the study process, making adaptations for your group.
- Select a representative sample of the Old Testament passages found in Section I.A. of the essay and a representative sample of the New Testament passages found in Section I.B. of the essay. Select enough passages so that there will be one per participant.
- Bookmark each passage in a different Bible.
- Write the word “peace” on a sheet of newsprint. Write the word “peacemaking” on a sheet of newsprint. Write the word “peacemakers” on a sheet of newsprint. Post the newsprint.
- Write the following questions on newsprint and post:

- What does this story tell us about the way God relates to us as a peacemaker?
- What does this story tell us about the way humans do (or do not) relate to one another as peacemakers?
- What does this story tell us about how we should move forward as God’s peacemakers?
- *(Optional)* Post pictures of peace and peacemaking around the room.

## As the Participants Gather

- Invite the participants to do free association and write on the newsprint the words, phrases, or images that come to mind when they think of “peace,” “peacemaking,” and “peacemakers.”
- *(Optional)* Invite the participants to identify pictures that speak to them of “peace,” “peacemaking,” and “peacemakers,” and tape those pictures to the appropriate newsprint.

## Introductions and Community-Building (10 minutes)

- Briefly state the purpose of this study: to explore how the biblical understanding of peace guides our peacemaking ministries as followers of Jesus.
- Invite the participants into a prayerful silence by lighting a candle and asking them to remember a time when they experienced peace. After a few moments of silence, invite the participants to create groups of threes and to introduce themselves by sharing their experiences of peace.
- Lead a prayer, invite a participant to lead a prayer, or use the following prayer:  
  
Holy One, Prince of Peace, fill every part of our being with your vision of peace, that we may be your peacemakers in this violent, hurting world. Amen.

## Defining Peace (20 minutes)

- Give half the group members one Old Testament passage from section I.A. of the essay.
- Give half the group members one New Testament passage from Section I.B. of the essay.
- Invite the participants to read their Scripture sample with the following question in mind: "How would I define 'peace' based on this Scripture passage?" Allow three to five minutes for silent reflection.
- Invite those who read passages from the Old Testament to share their answers with the group.
- Invite those who read passages from the New Testament to share their answers with the group.
- Hand out copies of the essay "Biblical Basis for Peacemaking" to the group. Refer them to the definitions provided in Section I. Does the group share the definitions in this document, based on their readings of the Scripture passages provided? Did they arrive at different definitions? Discuss how their definitions are or are not reflected in the handout.

## Visions and Stories of Peace (20 minutes)

- Invite a participant to read aloud Section II of "Biblical Basis for Peacemaking."
- Divide the group into five small groups. Assign each of the groups one of the following passages:
  - The Rich Young Man—Mark 10:17–22
  - The Samaritan Woman at the Well—John 4:5–42
  - The Laborers in the Vineyard—Matthew 20:1–16
  - Cain and Abel—Genesis 4:1–16
  - Mary and Martha—Luke 10:38–42
- Ask each group to discuss the following questions based on their passage and the definitions of peace that have been discussed:
  - What does this story tell us about the way God relates to us as a peacemaker?
  - What does this story tell us about the way humans do (or do not) relate to one another as peacemakers?
  - What does this story tell us about how we should move forward as God's peacemakers?

- Allow ten minutes for group discussions. Invite each group to report their insights and questions. Invite the participants to identify other biblical passages and stories that deepen the definition of peace.

## Peacemaking and the Biblical Story (10 minutes)

- Invite the participants to read aloud each of the three paragraphs in Section III of "Biblical Basis for Peacemaking."
- Invite the participants to identify some ways in which the followers of Jesus have been peacemakers in the past, how the followers of Jesus are peacemakers today, and possible future peacemaking ministries. The participants may identify an individual's efforts or the ministries of the congregation and community; they may be as broad as the church universal.
- As a closing prayer, invite the participants to reflect silently on how they experience God's calling them to be peacemakers this day. Allow a time of silence. Invite the participants to share their reflections. Close by leading a prayer, inviting a participant to lead a prayer, or using the following prayer:

Holy One, our teacher and friend, teach us how to live in and work for peace, that we may truly be children of God. Amen.

—Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist, co-pastor of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in Tucson, AZ

## For More Information and Additional Resources

### Presbyterian Peacemaking Program

(888) 728-7228, ext. 5784

[www.pcusa.org/peacemaking](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking)

Swords into Plowshares—the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program's blog

<http://presbyterian.typepad.com/peacemaking/>

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