

“Character that Counts: Reconciliation”

Isaiah 53:1-6; Ephesians 2:11-18 ¹

Μακαριοι οι ειρηνοποιοι, οτι αυτοι υιοι θεου κληθησονται.

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

On Saturday, June 14, 2003, an amazing thing happened in the mountains of Pikeville, Kentucky. On that day, sixty members of the Hatfield and McCoy families signed the following treaty, ending 125 years of feuding between the Hatfields of West Virginia and the McCoy's of Kentucky:

“We do hereby and formally declare an official end to all hostilities, implied, inferred, and real, between the families, now and forevermore. We ask by God’s grace and love that we be forever remembered as those that bound together the hearts of two families to form a family of freedom in America.” ²

Whether they knew it or not, when they signed that truce, the Hatfields and the McCoy's were following the seventh beatitude, which says, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”* (Matthew 5:9).

It’s important to notice that in the seventh beatitude, Jesus didn’t commend those who are simply peaceful. Neither did Jesus commend those who are *peace lovers*, *peace wishers*, or *peace hoppers*. Jesus commended those who are peace makers.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament tell us to *“seek peace and pursue it”* (Psalm 34:14; 1 Peter 3:11). Working for peace is sweaty soul work, and it’s often dangerous. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin worked courageously to bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians, saying, “Peace is not made with friends. Peace is made with enemies.”³ His reward was an assassin’s bullet on November 4, 1995.

Jesus also called us to make peace with our enemies: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:43-45). The hate-filled Zealots of Jesus’ day received His message no better than their descendants received Rabin’s words, and this message resulted in the deaths of both men.

Today, as in every time, the way to peace is often found through conflict and struggle, through standing for the right, contending for the friendless, and courageously standing in the place of danger. The way to make peace is to defeat evil through brave and selfless love.

In the year 404 A.D., a monk named Telemachus visited the great city of Rome. Being unfamiliar with the city, he followed the crowds to the Coliseum, where he was horrified to witness gladiatorial combat for the first time. Telemachus ran onto the field of combat and tried to stop the fighting in the name of Christ. The immediate result of this effort was that the crowd stoned Telemachus to death in the arena. The ultimate result of his death, though, was that the Emperor Honorius ended gladiatorial combat forever. According to tradition, the day of Telemachus’ death was the last gladiatorial combat that ever occurred in that arena.⁴

After Pastor Gordon MacDonald had given a lecture in a well-known teaching hospital, a Nigerian woman who is a physician introduced herself using an American name. Pastor MacDonald

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on August 17, 2014.

² Stephen L. Alligood, “American Profile,” CBS News.com, June 14, 2003.

³ *Newsweek*, September 13, 1993.

⁴ www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=740

asked her, “What is your African name?” When she gave it, he asked, “What does your name mean?”

She answered, “My name means ‘Child who takes the anger away.’ My parents had been forbidden to marry each other by their own parents, but they loved each other so much that they married anyway. For several years, their families ostracized them, but when my grandparents held me in their arms, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away.”⁵

“Child who takes the anger away.” Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? The Bible says, “*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, **Prince of Peace***” (Isaiah 9:6).

When this child became a man, “*He was despised and rejected by mankind . . . Surely he took up **our** pain and bore **our** suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for **our** transgressions, he was crushed for **our** iniquities; **the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed***” (Isaiah 53:3-5). Paul wrote that Jesus Himself is our peace: “*He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us.*” Though you and I were once far away from God, without hope either in this life or the next, we have been brought near to God through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13-14).

Being a peacemaker is often a hazardous enterprise, but it’s an enterprise that changes the hearts of ordinary people like you and me. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, told a story about peacemaking at a Promise Keepers meeting some years ago. The situation was that Bill had two friends who were law partners, yet they hated each other. When one of them became a Christian, he asked Bill, “Now that I’m a Christian, what should I do??

Bill responded, “Why not ask him to forgive you and tell him you love him?”

“I could *never* do that!” he said, “because I *don’t* love him.”

Bill prayed with his friend, reminding him that only God can create a love that takes the initiative to make peace. Such love is so absolutely amazing that it draws people to Jesus.

Well, the next morning, this lawyer screwed up his courage and told his partner, “I’ve become a Christian, and I want to ask you to forgive me for all I’ve done to hurt you. I want you to know that I love you.” His partner was so surprised and convicted that he, too, asked for forgiveness, and then said, “I, too, would like to become a Christian. Would you tell me how?”⁶

Alvin and Lyle Straight were brothers, but they’d had a falling out, and they hadn’t spoken to each other for ten years. In 1994, Alvin got word that Lyle had had a stroke, and he determined to seek reconciliation with his brother. Seventy-three year-old Alvin had lost his driver’s license because of poor eyesight, and he was too proud to ask for a ride, so he decided to drive his 1966 John Deere riding lawn mower from his home in Laurens, Iowa to see Lyle in Mt. Zion, Wisconsin, a distance of 250 miles.

Camping out in fields and back yards for six weeks, Alvin moved steadily along at a brisk five miles an hour, finally arriving at a run-down house on a dirt road outside Mt. Zion. Shuffling slowly toward the house, Alvin called out, “Lyle! Lyle!” There was no answer. New wrinkles came on Alvin’s face, as he wondered whether he had come too late.

⁵ Gordon MacDonald, *Leadership Weekly*, November 6, 2002.

⁶ Bill Bright, *Men of Integrity*, vol. 1, no. 1.

Finally, a voice from within called out, “Alvin? Alvin?” Lyle came to the door, holding onto a walker. Lyle invited Alvin to sit with him on the porch, while he surveyed the lawn mower. With tears in his eyes, Lyle asked, “Alvin, you came all this way . . . on *that* . . . just to see *me*?”

Alvin smiled, and said through his own tears, “Yep.”⁷

Lyle’s question, “**You came all this way . . . on *that* . . . just to see *me*?**” reminds me of the words of an old Gospel song: “He left the splendor of heaven, knowing His destiny was the lonely hill of Golgotha, There to lay down His life for me. . . . If that isn’t love, the ocean is dry, there’s no stars in the sky, and the sparrow can’t fly. If that isn’t love, then heaven’s a myth, there’s no feeling like this, if that isn’t love!”⁸

My friends, in calling us to be peacemakers, God doesn’t ask us to do what God hasn’t already done; and so God calls us to be peacemakers, too. It’s so very easy to relate to other people only at the level of stereotypes and pigeon holes, rather than as folks with hurts and hopes a lot like our own. It’s easy to jump to conclusions and exclusions rather than seeking heart understanding.

My involvement with a citywide evangelistic crusade some years ago had a significant—and unexpected—dimension of peacemaking about it. I was surprised by the strength of the barriers that exist between churches that ordain women and those who do not; between those who view baptism as essential to salvation and those who do not; between those who use the word “inerrancy” and those who do not; between those who prefer traditional worship and those who do not; between those who emphasize evangelism and those who do not; between those who emphasize social action and those who do not.

And in pondering all of this I’ve been reminded of Paul Billheimer’s words in his powerful little book, *Love Covers*: “Since disunity in the Body [of Christ] probably sends more people to hell than open sin, **breaking fellowship over differences in those standards or practices which are not actually necessary to salvation is a greater sin than the supposed error which precipitated the breach.** This is not to claim that honest difference of opinion is wrong. **What is wrong is the deficiency in love which allows the difference to *divide*.** . . .

He continued, “After all, the most important question is not who is right or who is wrong—not even who is most nearly right. The important question is: What are we most interested in—proving our point and promoting our own theological concept . . . or being the answer to Christ’s prayer for unity by healing the wounds of His Body, and making possible the outpouring of His Spirit on a world-wide scale?”⁹

We Baptists could learn a thing or two from brother Billheimer, I think. The Southern Baptist Convention has been caught up in theological controversy of one sort or another for nearly forty years, and, while I’ve not been a major combatant in that war, I myself am not without sin. Preparations for that evangelistic crusade taught me some things, too.

While most of us tend to have a more complimentary self-understanding than the evidence can support, I like to think of myself as a conservative in theology but a moderate in attitude. I was willing to teach on the faculty at Southern Seminary with fundamentalists (up to a point), and I try to maintain friendly relationships with pastors and churches whose viewpoints are rather

⁷ *The Straight Story* (a true story; Disney, 1999), rated G, written by John Roach II and Mary Sweeney, directed by David Lynch.

⁸ “If That Isn’t Love,” words and music by Dottie Rambo.

⁹ Paul Billheimer, *Love Covers: A Biblical Design for Unity in the Body of Christ* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1981), pp. 42, 53.

different from mine or from ours. For all that, though, I must confess that I had misgivings when I learned that our crusade was going to bring Dr. Elmer Towns to town.

I didn't really know anything about Elmer Towns, but when I learned that he co-founded Liberty University with Jerry Falwell, I was uneasy to be a part of the organization that was bringing him to town. Even so, I decided that I would go to his seminar.

In that seminar, Dr. Towns talked about prayer, about revival, and about fasting. I took notes. I learned things that were helpful. I appreciated his passion for the lost. And I bought several of his books. I decided that, while Dr. Towns and I have different opinions about some things, Paul Billheimer was right: Elmer Towns and I are brothers in Christ, and we're both trying to be obedient to God's call as best we can.

My friend, do you aspire to be one of the "movers and shakers" of this world? *Then be a peacemaker.* Peacemaking is not easy. It's a lot easier to fan the ashes of ancient feuds, to appeal to prejudice and hatred, than it is to work toward peace, healing, and reconciliation.

Jesus never suggested that peacemaking would be easy; but He said that when we're involved in making peace, you and I are about our Father's business, and are thereby clearly seen to be God's children. John Broadus, one of the early leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, and a true peacemaker in his own right, once said that **"There is no more godlike work to be done in this world than peacemaking."**¹⁰

I sometimes hear people say, "I'll forgive, but I won't forget." That attitude is not forgiveness, and it will not lead to healing. **The "forgetting" of forgiveness is choosing to act toward the forgiven one as if the offense had never happened. The "forgetting" of working for peace is choosing to never, ever bring up the offense again, because if it's brought up, it's not forgiven.** If we live in this way, the time will come when we really don't remember the offense at all anymore. When that day comes, we'll truly be children of God, *"who blots out [our] sins for [his] own sake and will never [ever] think of them again"* (Isaiah 43:25).

Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda was left on Lubang Island in the Philippines on Christmas Day, 1944, with orders to "carry on the mission even if Japan surrenders." There were four other soldiers with him. One soldier surrendered six years later, in 1950. A second was killed by police in 1954. The third was killed in 1972. Onoda continued his war alone.

All efforts to convince Onoda to surrender, and all efforts to capture him, failed. He ignored messages from loudspeakers announcing Japan's surrender and that Japan was now an ally of the United States. He eluded massive manhunts, living off the land and raiding fields and gardens.

Finally, after receiving a personal order from his former commanding officer, Hiroo Onoda surrendered his rusty sword on March 10, 1974—twenty-nine years after the war ended. His evaluation of the experience? *"Nothing pleasant happened in the twenty-nine years in the jungle,"* he said.¹¹

How is it with you this morning? Are there folks in your life toward whom you need to get moving on your John Deere tractor before it's too late? More importantly, is your spirit wasting away in a jungle of separation from God, even though the war is long over? No matter how far away

¹⁰ Cited in D. A. Carson, "Commentary on Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, _____

¹¹ Summarized from a 1974 story in *Newsweek*. Hiroo Onoda, "The Last Samurai," died on January 16, 2014. www.digitaljournal.com/news/odd+news/op-ed-hiroo-onoda-the-last-samurai/article/366348

you've gotten from God, my friend, Jesus is your Peace Maker. Today can be the day when you, too, turn in your rusty sword and accept a pardon . . . both for time and for eternity.

Don't waste the day my friend. Don't waste this day.