

The Biblical Vision of Peace

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“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”
(Romans 12:21).

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Dedication:

Reginald H. Fuller (1915-2007), S.T.D., D.D.

Ilse B. Fuller, D.H.L.

Teachers and family friends

Both Doctor Fullers have made invaluable contributions to
modern scholarship and to the faithful practice of
contemporary Christian life.

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Each of us, in our own way, longs for God's glorious day, which was promised more than twenty-five centuries ago through many great prophets, including Isaiah and Micah:

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up...to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths..." He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken (Micah 4:1-4; see also Isaiah 2:1-4).

I. Gospel of Peace¹

But how do we get from here to there? *Hearing Micah 6:8 is the first step toward peace: **We are to "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" with our God.*** At the close of the twentieth century, the dangerous Cold War ended, but it was replaced by incessant terrorism and civil wars. Oppression, death-squads, mob violence, fundamentalist crusades, and environmental degradation abound as we begin the twenty-first century. World-wide cycles of fear and wrath are being fueled by injustice, hatred, arrogance, genocide, and high-tech weapons. Indeed, between humanity's terrorism and counter-terrorism and nature's droughts, floods, storms, fires, and earthquakes, the very

creation seems to be undoing itself. We wait for the mouth of the LORD of hosts to speak.

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that our Savior is the same yesterday, today, and forever (13:8). Perhaps then, the final word that will come from the mouth of the LORD will be the same that was spoken “yesterday”—at the creation. That word is, “Good!”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Gospel of Peace. This is my thesis, but these words are not mine. They arose from the Consultation on the Bible and Peace, sponsored by Friends United Meeting, May 2-4, 2003. I will begin this paper with the best-known words of peace that Jesus gave us. Then I will explore this Gospel of Peace through the lens of God’s good creation and the logical question, “In this fallen world, where did the ‘good’ of God’s creation go?”

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I A. Words from the Prince of Peace

The words of Jesus, as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount, pose a stark challenge to any world superpower and to any ruling national power, party, or tribe:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Matthew 5:3-9).

A little further in this chapter, which scholars consider part of the First Discourse (or teaching) in Matthew, Jesus speaks even more bluntly. Jesus speaks to people who have power but also to victims of power. He speaks to those who would try to correct injustice by violent means:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you: Do not resist an evil-doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and

sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous
(Matthew 5: 38-45).²

This is the world into which Jesus invites his followers. This is the faith and practice that leads to the glorious Reign of God. But obeying this teaching seems naïve and foolish! Is peace practical, or even possible, in this fallen world? Mark 10:27 tells us all things are possible with God. But with the parent, who desperately wanted Jesus to heal his child, I cry, “I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Peace is desirable in theory, but devilish in practice. It is very hard to believe that peace, for which our souls yearn so deeply, can truly happen in our lifetime. This dilemma is not new.

I B. Rocky Has Been the Road to Peace

Dilemmas about peace are part of the Christian tradition. Acts 24:14 says Christianity was first called *The Way*. Until early in the fourth century it was a pacifist religion—*The Way of the Prince of Peace*. It was also persecuted by the Roman Empire. Things changed, however, when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Christian leaders began to accept the burden of protecting Constantine’s Roman Empire. Early in the fifth century, as the barbarian tribes were dismantling the western part of the Roman Empire, the North African theologian Augustine developed the “just war theory.” He expounded on the conditions under which Christians could fight and kill. Even so, many monks and nuns continued their witness to pacifism—*The Way of the Prince of Peace*.³

After the barbarian invasions, the power of the Western Roman Empire was replaced by the Roman Catholic Church. In the early sixteenth century, many Roman Catholics tried to reform their church. The hierarchy (or leadership) resisted most of these efforts. As a result, the reformers became leaders of a new Christian movement—the Reformation. Widespread protests against the Roman Catholic leadership engulfed Europe for over

a century. The reformers created their own churches, which became Protestant denominations, such as Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Anabaptist. From the Anabaptists came two historic peace churches of continental Europe—the Mennonites and the Brethren. The third historic peace church is the Religious Society of Friends, which began in the British Isles during the next century. In 1666, Margaret Fell Fox, a co-founder of the Religious Society of Friends, assured King Charles II that Quakers were an “innocent, harmless, and peaceable people,” who would not “take up Arms, nor Plot, nor contrive to do any Man Wrong, nor Injury, much less the King.”⁴

The eighteenth century saw the rise of Methodism in Britain and North America. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the twentieth century, more and more Christian denominations questioned the compatibility of war with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1983, the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops issued an official teaching in support of peace (see footnote 3). In 2000, the U.S. United Methodist Church declared:

We deplore war and urge the peaceful settlement of all disputes among nations. From the beginning, the Christian conscience has struggled with the harsh realities of violence and war, for these evils clearly frustrate God’s loving purposes for humankind... Some of us believe that war, and other acts of violence, are never acceptable to Christians.⁵

The Sermon on the Mount has challenged every generation of Christians—in every country and of every ethnicity. Generations have been dominated by Christians whose daily living ignored the Sermon on the Mount. What does it mean to be a peacemaker in my life? How can I challenge an evil-doer without doing evil myself? What does it mean to love my enemies? In my experience, the answers begin with the realization that **I** cannot do it alone. Each of us needs a loving community

of peacemakers. We need our community to be grounded in the God of Creation and inspired by the Holy Spirit to follow and proclaim the Gospel of the Prince of Peace.

II. God's Good Creation is the Peaceful Community

Why begin a paper about peace with a discussion of creation? On page three I asked, "How can we get from here to peace?" I said the first step is "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" with our God. But we can't do this alone. ***The second step toward peace is to be in a loving, God-centered, God-sustained, and God-guided community that seeks justice, kindness, and humility.***

The question I ask now is, "In which direction lies the path toward peace? Is peace a return or a departure? Must we leave the present creation and human nature before we can have peace? In other words, is peace hard-wired into the created order? Is it God's desire that we return to the peace of Eden? Perhaps the opposite is true. Is violence integral to creation—hard-wired into the created order? Stated another way, when seeking peace it is crucial to know which came first, peace or violence. Genesis 1:1 tells us that what came first is God. In the beginning—**God!** Many Friends and other Christians have experienced that when our lives turn back toward God, we find peace. Let us then look at peace through the lens of creation.

Genesis 1 shows us a mesmerizing unfolding of creation. The Spirit (wind or breath)⁶ of God begins to move and brood across the primordial chaos. Suddenly God speaks, "Let there be light!" Behold! There is light. And God sees that the light is good (1:1-4). As each word is spoken by God, chaos peacefully flows into order and balance. Creation comes forth in greater fullness. And God judges each and every aspect to be good. God calls the physical, material creation "good." Finally, on the sixth day, God creates humanity in the divine image. By God's word male and female are called into being—women and men—created simultaneously.

We were created in the image of God. We were also created together—male and female—as part of God’s already existing good community. On the seventh day, God rested to enjoy fellowship with God’s creation, including humankind (1:27-2:3). The “good” community has God at its center and members living in relationships of mutual respect, justice, and peace.

Genesis 2 gives us a different, more rustic story of creation. Here God is called by his personal name, *Yahweh*, which is usually translated as “the LORD.” *Yahweh*, who is depicted as a potter, bends down and scoops up earth [*adamah*]. From the earth, *Yahweh* fashions an earthling [*adam*]. In verse 7 God breathes into the earthling the breath of life. Then the LORD creates a garden for the earthling to tend. But things **are not good** (2:18). The earthling is alone and **this is not good**. As Ben Richmond, of Friends United Meeting, points out: The first “not-good” thing about creation was aloneness. So *Yahweh*, depicted as a farmer, creates animals for the earthling to name and care for (2:19-20). In ancient Hebrew culture, naming is an act of creation. The LORD is inviting the human to be a co-creator. God makes and the earthling names—they create together. But still, things are not good. So *Yahweh*, depicted as a surgeon, divides the earthling into male and female (2:21-24).⁷ Adam and Eve are to live in community with each other and the rest of creation, with the LORD God at the center. Things are good again. Things are peaceful. But then the snake spoke.

III. Where Did God’s Good Go?

Sin entered; Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden; Cain murdered Abel. Was God wrong when God declared that creation was good? As scripture continues to unfold, however, God keeps calling forth the good from creation. God calls forth Abraham and Sarah and gives them a son, Isaac, to inherit the promise of being a blessing to the nations. God calls Miriam to save the baby Moses. Moses, Miriam, and their brother Aaron, call the children of Sarah and Abraham back to the Promised Land. God does not give up on us or on creation.

If the good of creation can be restored, the question is “How?” Logic suggests three paths. One possible starting point is that God must first obliterate the original creation. A second possibility is that the good exists, but has fled the physical, material realm. The third is that the good of the creation itself can be reclaimed. Let us look at these possibilities from the point of view of Hebrew Scripture, our Old Testament.

III A. God’s Good in the Old Testament

1. Our first possibility is that the current creation is totally evil and God will completely obliterate and replace it. The next time God will make a **really good** creation. In the story of Noah, found in the first book of the Bible, God saves a remnant. Despite the wickedness of the human community (Genesis 6:5-8), God saves Noah and his family. Through Noah’s family, God saves the creation. Noah and his family bring the animals onto the ark, ride out the flood, and disembark when the waters recede. God sends them forth with the same commandment God gave in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1). In the story of Noah, therefore, restoring the good does not depend on the complete obliteration of creation. Enough good exists to “multiply and fill the earth.”

What about the last book of the Bible? At the end of Revelation, despite the passing away of the old heaven and the old earth and the appearance of the new heaven and earth (21:1), nations and people are saved to live in the new Jerusalem (21:22-26). Revelation speaks of more destruction than does Noah’s story. However, it does not speak of the total destruction and complete replacement of everything. Therefore, good must still exist in this fallen world.

2. The second possibility is that the good, which God recognized at creation, does indeed exist. The original good, however, is no longer in the physical and material world. This is “separatist thinking.” According to separatist thinking, the good

has fled to the spiritual world. One aspect of this is the spiritualist approach, which would say that the only real good is in heaven. We just have to die and become 100% spirit in order to enjoy the good. A related aspect is the dualistic approach, which would say that the physical, material world is hopelessly fallen and sinful. Therefore, in this life we must focus on our spirits and disengage from our bodies and the world. Separatism is not native to Palestine, the cradle of our Bible. It entered Christian theology because of Hellenistic and other non-Christian influences.

Our Hebrew ancestors would have rejected both of these separatist approaches. They did not overly spiritualize the God who formed the earthling from the earth and breathed into its nostrils. They did not overly spiritualize the God who planted a garden in Eden, who formed animals and birds from the ground, and who made garments for the earthlings to wear (Genesis 2:6-19; 3:21). The God described in the Old Testament transcended creation, but **God was not separated, absent, or estranged from God's creation.**

As we have just seen, our Hebrew ancestors were not spiritualists. They were not dualists either. In Deuteronomy 6:5, they declare that their mission in life is to love God with all their hearts, with all their souls, and with all their might. In ancient Hebrew culture, the heart was the center of one's thinking and will power. The word translated into English as "soul" denotes the entire being. They considered the body-spirit to be one.⁸ Therefore, our Hebrew ancestors tried to love God with all their thinking and will, with all of their living being (body-soul), and with all their might or physical strength. This same verse was cited by Jesus, as the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:29-30; Luke 10:27).

The Hebrew greeting, *shalom*⁹, which is usually translated as peace, is more than just the absence of war. *Shalom* includes wholeness and wellness—we can even say that it includes God's goodness. When Jacob meets shepherds at a well near Haran, he inquires about his uncle Laban (Genesis 29:6). Jacob asks, "Is it well with him?" The word translated as "well" is actually *shalom*.

“Is it *shalom* with my uncle?” The ancient Hebrew people did not seek to live and worship dualistically. They labored to live and worship in a holistic way. Peace is wholeness and goodness in our thinking and our willing, in our entire being (body-soul), and in our physical strength. Peace is not just for heaven; peace is not just for our spirits.

3. Scripture refutes our first two possibilities about the good of creation. The good, which God declared, has not been completely lost. Nor has the good of creation been consigned to heaven or only to earthlings who lead lives of pure spirit. We are left, therefore, with the third alternative—there is still good in God’s physical, material creation. The Bible, especially the Psalms, supports this answer. Psalm 29 tells the sun, moon, and stars to worship God. “Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.” Psalm 93:3 declares that “the floods have lifted up their voice” to God’s glory. In Psalm 148:7 even the sea monsters praise the LORD. Clearly the good of creation has not vanished. The good is sufficient for the physical world to love and worship God.

Psalm 24 reminds us that God claims all of creation—both inanimate and human—“The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those [people] who live in it.” Psalm 100 begins, “Make a joyful noise to the LORD, **all the earth.**” Psalm 47:1, 9 says, “Clap your hands all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy...The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham.” These ancient Hebrew hymns remind us that the physical, material creation—including its people, their leaders, and their communities—has not fallen beyond God’s reach. Despite the existence of sin and evil, the good, which God declared in the beginning, still exists. God will enable the good to grow and encompass everyone. All people will then worship at the Temple of God and be gathered into the bosom of Abraham. The Psalms do not declare the perpetuation of injustice and violence. The Psalms declare the coming Reign of God on earth—a reign full of joy and peace.

The Psalms paint an optimistic picture of the past, present, and future of creation. What about the Hebrew prophets? God called prophets to Israel during times of trouble—times of wicked kings, the oppression of the poor, idol worship, foreign invasions, or exile from the Promised Land. Prophets acknowledged the pain and destruction of the present moment and often warned that the worst was yet to come. Still, they prophesied hope. Isaiah envisioned the creation as being rearranged and re-gathered, but not obliterated:

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together...” (Isaiah 40:3-5).

Some would say this is just nice poetry—or only a literary metaphor. But I say this is a promise. This is a divine promise grounded in the goodness and eventual restoration of God’s creation.¹⁰ ***The third step toward peace is to believe this divine promise—to have faith in God.***

Even the most optimistic of prophets were clear that humankind **could not save itself**. God is the essential actor. Some saw humankind as a passive recipient of God’s salvation, but many prophets saw God wanting our cooperation. Just as Isaiah told creation to “prepare the way,” God called Ezekiel to be a co-actor in restoring creation:

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones... Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones hear the word of the LORD”... So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I

prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together... “Therefore prophesy and say to them... O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live...” (Ezekiel 37:1, 4, 7, 12a, 13b-14).

Why am I belaboring this point? The rationale of many Christians who support war has been, “It’s a fallen world. Get used to it! If you don’t, you’re being foolish.” Yes, it is a fallen world. But scripture promises us that **God will not allow creation to remain fallen.**

So where did the good go? Nowhere! The good did not die. The good is still here, but obscured by a fallen world. The biblical response is not to accept the fallen-ness, but to nurture the goodness. The biblical response is to help Isaiah lift the valleys and make low the hills so that everyone will see the glory of the LORD. The biblical response is to help Ezekiel preach to the dry bones of hurt and despair and of fear and anger. Paul warns us that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (I Corinthians 3:19). The biblical response is to witness against the foolish “wisdom” of a world that claims it can champion peace by waging war.

III B. Friends Reclaim the Good and Live for God’s Peace

In 1648 George Fox had a vision that convinced him it was possible for humanity to be restored to Eden. In Genesis, when the LORD drove Adam and Eve from the garden, a cherubim with a flaming sword was left to guard the way to the tree of life (3:24). Adam and Eve could not return. But in his vision, George Fox did return to Eden:

Now I was come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God. All things were new... I knew nothing but pureness, and innocency, and righteousness, being renewed up into the image of God

by Christ Jesus, so that I say I was come up to the state of Adam which he was in before he fell... The creation was opened to me... But I was immediately taken up in spirit, to see into another or more steadfast state than Adam's in innocency, even into a state in Christ Jesus, that should never fall. And the LORD showed me that such as were faithful to him in the power and light of Christ, should come up into that state in which Adam was before he fell, in which the admirable words of the creation, and the virtues thereof, may be known...¹¹

Fox was convinced that, “the admirable words of the creation, and the virtues thereof, may be known” by living human beings. What were the words of creation? The repeated words of creation were “**good**,” “**It is good**.” What was the virtue of creation? The virtue of creation was *shalom* or **peace**. Genesis 1 and numerous psalms show us a community of peace with God at the center. Fox believed the words of Genesis—that the physical, material world was still good and that Eden could be realized again. He acted on this conviction by performing many healing miracles.¹² He brought “the good” to people with his touch and restored them to God’s peace.

During the next century, a dominant image for North American Friends was the Peaceable Kingdom. The Peaceable Kingdom is from Isaiah’s vision of a restored Eden. A Philadelphia Quaker, Edward Hicks, painted sixty-two known pictures of the Peaceable Kingdom from 1816 until the night before his death in 1849. The background usually featured a human deed of peace and justice, such as William Penn signing a treaty with Native Americans. If Hicks were painting today, I believe his backgrounds would include the peace work of Kenyan Friends. In the foreground Hicks painted Isaiah’s prophecy:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling

together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Friends down through the generations have acted on the belief that Eden or the Peaceable Kingdom is possible. Friends have acted on the belief that this fallen creation can be restored to the goodness of its beginning, to God's community of *shalom*. This conviction has empowered Quaker testimonies to integrity, simplicity, equality, justice, and peace. Each generation has embodied these testimonies differently—in concern for the environment, in opposition to slavery, in struggles for women's rights, and in work for peace and against war.

Friends have believed that with Adam, we are called to be co-creators with God. With Isaiah, we are called to be co-visionaries and co-preparers of the Peaceable Kingdom. With Ezekiel, we are called to preach to the dry bones of despair and be co-restorers of God's good creation. ***The fourth step toward peace is to act upon our belief in God's promise.***

IV. New Testament Proclamations of Peace

The earliest known writings in the New Testament come from the apostle Paul. What does he tell us about good and evil, about peace and vengeance? "Do not repay anyone evil for evil... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-19a, 21). But Paul recognized how foolish this teaching would appear. Let us revisit Paul's warning:

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness.” And again, “The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile” (I Corinthians 3:18-20).

The so-called “wisdom” of this world is that pacifism is for the foolish and peace is only for heaven. The wisdom of God is that violence is ultimately futile. The good news is that through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is reaching into this world and reuniting earth with heaven. In Paul’s words, God is reconciling the world to himself (II Corinthians 5:19). At the birth of Mary’s son the angels sang about peace on earth (Luke 2:14). Her son, Jesus, grew to teach us a prayer for God’s peaceable reign. Matthew 6:9-10 reads:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
 Your kingdom come.
 Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Have you ever thought of the Lord’s Prayer as an apocalyptic prayer?¹³ Followers of Jesus pray to see God’s heavenly reign on earth—now. Followers of Jesus pray to see God’s divine will being done on earth—now. This is the Good News. Good News is the translation of the Greek word Gospel. The Good News is that heaven is for earth and heaven’s peace is for the earthly community as well.

But the bad news is that the “wisdom” of this world, like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, is subtle. It has influenced many Christians to respond, “Yes, someday peace will come, but not yet. Today our job is just to pray.” Are we simply to pray for peace while preparing for war? According to Psalm 34:14, the answer is “No!” “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.” These words—*depart, do, seek, pursue*—are active

verbs. Paul echoes them, “Let us then *pursue* what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:19). Pacifism is both prayer **and** action. It is *departing* from the wisdom of this world. It is *doing*, *seeking*, and *pursuing* peace. It is *living* as a peace-maker. Pacifism is actively co-creating the peace of Christ.

IV A. Preparing for Peace, Matthew 24 and 25

Our approach has been to look at the good creation and the peaceful community in several biblical traditions. We have looked at Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms, prophetic writings, apocalyptic writings, the Gospels, and Paul’s epistles. This approach shows us that the good of creation, which includes the wholeness of peaceful relationships, is not consigned to an isolated or insignificant part of scripture. It shows us that the good of creation is not limited to a short period of Judeo-Christian history. By using this broad, sweeping approach, we have also had the opportunity to appreciate how different biblical texts echo, resonate, and add to each other. For many concerns and issues, this would be sufficient.

The weakness of this broad, sweeping approach is that, in the act of linking different passages together, we have unlinked each from its own context. Once a passage has been uprooted from its context, it loses its depth. Peace is a complex issue—easy to accept in the abstract, but difficult to practice in the particular. Peace is also a critical issue—literally a matter of life and death. A discussion of the Bible and peace merits both breadth and depth. Because of this, I am going to begin a more thorough exploration of Matthew 24 and 25.

These chapters are part of what scholars call the Fifth Discourse in the book of Matthew (the Sermon on the Mount, 5:1-7:29, is the First Discourse). Let us begin with a contextual overview of this fifth teaching. In chapter 21 Jesus rides into Jerusalem. The crowds wave palm branches and shout “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Jesus then throws the money changers out of the Jewish Temple and begins healing people who are blind

and lame (21:12-17). These three actions set up the final confrontation with the leadership of his birth-right religion. The betrayal and arrest of Jesus are in chapter 26. Chapter 27 narrates the trial, crucifixion, and burial. The last chapter tells the resurrection story.

Chapters 24 and 25, then, are pivotal chapters. They are the transition between Jesus' teaching ministry and the Last Supper. If you have read these chapters recently, you may be wondering about the strange, violent, and bizarre imagery. In reading the Bible, it is important to understand that the original words have come to us from very ancient and different cultures.

Three images in these chapters are cultural metaphors for the full and complete Reign of God¹⁴ on earth. One is of the coming of the bridegroom (25:1-13). The heavenly banquet, which ancient people imagined would begin the Reign of God, was often likened to a wedding banquet. Another image is the return of the master (25:14-30). The master's return often symbolized the divine accounting that would come before the peace and joy of God's Reign could be experienced. It is because of this expected accounting that John the Baptist preached, "Repent! For the Reign of God is at hand!" The third image is the Son of Man sitting in judgment (25:31-46). In the Old Testament, this figure is found most prominently in the apocalyptic book of Daniel. The "Son of Man" was God's agent for the end times, the person who would inaugurate God's Reign on earth. For many early Christians, this image merged with their image of God's promised messiah. Jesus Christ is the Son of Man; Jesus Christ is God's Messiah. Thematically Matthew 24 and 25 point to the establishment of God's Reign on earth through the return, or the Second Coming, of Jesus Christ.

From a literary point of view, these transition chapters join the early ministry of Jesus (chapters 1-23) with his betrayal, execution, and resurrection (chapters 26-28). In chapter 24 especially, there is violence and judgment. We can think of this violent imagery as a preview—a preview of the crucifixion, the persecution of the early churches, and continuing world violence.

Matthew 24 begins with graphic destruction. The Temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed (as it was in 70 C.E.). False messiahs will come. (Some thought Hitler was a messiah.) There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be famines and earthquakes. The Gospels call these “the birth pangs” of God’s Coming Reign (Matthew 24:8). Chapter 24 also warns that followers of Jesus will be persecuted. Many will flee for their lives. The violence of Matthew 24 reminds us that birthing God’s *shalom* from the womb of a fallen world will not always be easy. The fallen world will most often forcefully defend its fallen beliefs and practices.

These transition chapters also promise restoration. The sun, moon, and stars will darken, but suddenly all the tribes of the earth “will see the ‘Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matthew 24: 30-31). How then are the followers of our crucified messiah to live until he returns on clouds of heaven? How are we to prepare for the coming of God’s Reign of peace and joy? Matthew tells us we are to remain watchful (24:36-44). We are to prepare by doing God’s work and treating others equitably (24:45-51).

The *watching*, *preparing*, and *doing* of Matthew 24 are expounded in Matthew 25. Let’s take a closer look at the Parables of the Ten Bridesmaids, the Talents, and the Last Judgment. Matthew’s community understood that Jesus told these parables about himself. He is the bridegroom, the master, and the Son of Man. Chapter 25 immediately gives us its frame of reference by announcing, “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this...”

1. Matthew 25:1b-2 goes on to say, “Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise.” The five foolish maidens took their lamps but did not take any extra oil. When their bridegroom was delayed, the maidens fell asleep, and the lamps began to go out. Perhaps the foolish women were wondering if their prince would ever come! Don’t we often wonder if peace will ever come?

Perhaps the foolish maidens thought there would be plenty of time to prepare. Do we ever put off preparation for peace?

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, a shout went up, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out and meet him” (25:6). The five foolish maidens begged the wise ones for some oil to replenish their sputtering lamps. The five wise ones said there would not be enough to share; the foolish maidens should buy oil. While the five foolish maidens were out shopping, the groom came and took the five wise ones into the wedding banquet and closed the door. The foolish maidens returned and begged to come in but the bridegroom replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you” (25:12). The parable concludes with, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (25:13). This parable warns us to be watchful and to remain prepared. The “wisdom” of the world is that we must prepare for war. The wisdom of the Gospel is that our oil is for the lamps of peace, not for bullets and bombs or machetes and arrows. We are to prepare for the Prince of Peace, even though the day and the hour seem very far away.

This parable in Matthew also echoes the Psalm 34:14, “Seek peace and pursue it.”

2. How are we to prepare for peace? The Parable of the Talents gives some clues, “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them” (25:14). One servant received five talents, another two, and the last man received one talent (a talent was a measure of money). The master gave “to each according to his ability” (25:15). This tells us that each one had the skill to use his treasure wisely. While the master was away, the first servant invested the five talents and gained five more. The second one invested his two talents and gained two more. But the servant with one talent grew fearful and buried it in the ground. Genesis 1 tells us that part of the treasure God invested in creation was the “good.” The challenge of faith is to take the good we have received, each according to our ability, and invest it back into God’s creation.

When the master returns he receives his treasure and the interest earned by the first and second servants. He says they are “good and trustworthy” and they have done well (25:21, 23). But the fearful one, who did nothing with what he had been given, was declared to be wicked and lazy (25:26). The master ordered him thrown into outer darkness (25:30). I identify with the fearful servant. It is a great temptation to bury what God has given us into despair, anger, hatred, protection, or self-righteousness. When I am afraid, this is almost a reflexive response.

But however frightened I am, this parable in Matthew reminds me of Paul’s words, “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:19).

3. The final passage in this chapter is about the Last Judgment—sometimes called the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Like the beginning of Matthew 25, there is nothing subtle or hidden about the message:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:31-36).

The sheep are very surprised! None of them remembered having helped the Son of Man. So they asked when they had

done this. The answer is, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (25:40). **God’s Peaceable Kingdom comes through humble works of justice and mercy.**

Those who won the place of honor in the kingdom had not thought they were doing anything special. Like the five wise bridesmaids and the two trustworthy servants, the sheep were humbly doing what they were supposed to do. They were preparing. They were following the words of Micah to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. The Last Judgment brings us back, full circle, to the Hebrew vision:

In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains... Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up... to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction... He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more... (Isaiah 2:1-4; see also Micah 4:1-4).

IV B. Incarnation and Resurrection

With all we have discussed, relatively little is uniquely Christian. We have seen how Hebrew Scripture supports the belief that God’s creation is still good and is destined for peace. We have examined supporting stories from the Gospels and quotes from the apostle Paul. But almost all of these biblical passages can be accepted by someone who only recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as a prophet of God or an extraordinarily Spirit-filled teacher. So let us take one more step. Let’s look at Christian theology. We have discussed what followers of Jesus would do. Would followers of Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Son of God, seek peace and pursue it?

The creation story of Genesis is expanded in John 1:1-5. In Genesis, God's Spirit broods across the chaos and from the chaos God calls creation into being by the divine Word. John's Gospel starts, not with the birth of Jesus, not even with the birth of creation, but it starts before the creation:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The entire world was created by God through Christ. No wonder God immediately called it "Good!" If all of creation—every star, every twig, every animal, every person, every atomic particle—came into being through the Word of God, then everything bears, in its very nature, the mark of its Divine Creation. Everything bears the mark of Christ—that Life and Light which cannot be overcome. The good, which God declared at creation, can be obscured in a fallen world but it cannot be forever lost as long as God is still God. ***In the very act of creation, the world was blessed by God.***

As Christians we believe in a second blessing—the incarnation. John's Gospel also tells us that the Word, who co-existed with God before the beginning of time and space, became flesh.¹⁵ "Flesh" was a shocking, crass Greek word in ancient Hellenic culture, which was prone toward dualism.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through

Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1:14, 16-18).

By deliberately using the word “flesh,” the community of John declared that, like their Hebrew ancestors, they were not dualists. They were “whole-ists.” The very Word of God became embodied in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. God not only created the physical world and pronounced it “good,” but God embraced the physical world by becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Once enfleshed, the Word of God lived among us. In and through Jesus Christ, God fully embraced our human community. ***By virtue of God's creating and by the birth and life of Jesus Christ, this world has been doubly blessed by God.***

Our finite minds have trouble grasping the immense goodness that God has bestowed upon us in the creation and the incarnation. This problem is not new. People have always tried to make God's gifts and presence more understandable—more in keeping with the “wisdom” of the world. In so doing, they have limited God's gifts and presence. As we discussed, the Hellenic neighbors of our Christian ancestors accepted dualism. Dualism posits two separate worlds—the physical and the spiritual. Dualism only values the spiritual. To a dualist it is illogical that the Awesome Divine, the Sovereign God, would touch the physical, material world. It is even more illogical that the Absolute Good would be touched in return.

In particular, some followers of John's Gospel began to apply dualism to the story of Jesus. They could not imagine that the Son of God would actually eat, drink, and die in the flesh. By the end of the first century, they were trying to spiritualize the person and story of Jesus. To spiritualize Jesus is to de-humanize him. To de-humanize Jesus is to limit the gift and power of God's incarnation. Fortunately for us, a Christian elder named John, who had known the earthly Jesus, testified to the new generation. John wrote to correct the heresy of dualism:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship [or community] with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ...” (1 John 1:1-3).

Pay attention to the physical, sensory imagery: what we have *heard*, what we have *seen*, what we have *touched* with our hands about the eternal life that was with God.

The Gospel of John and the First Epistle of John witness to God’s radical embrace of creation in the “there and then” of the disciples’ lives. The resurrection of Jesus Christ seals God’s radical embrace of creation in the “here and now” of our lives and the lives of every generation. The flesh of Jesus of Nazareth was not only good enough for the incarnation, but it was good enough for the resurrection. But there was a doubting Thomas, a disciple who needed to see and touch for himself.

A week later [after the resurrection] his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:26-28).

God’s full embrace of humanity was present in the resurrected Jesus. ***By virtue of the creation, incarnation, and resurrection, this world and all who live in it have been triply blessed.***

V. Conclusion—the Christian Challenge

God created the world and declared it “good.” Despite the fall, the Word of God reaffirmed the good of creation by becoming incarnate in the flesh of a first-century Palestinian Jew. Despite the crucifixion, God demonstrated God’s will to restore creation by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Despite their doubts, the community of disciples was re-gathered by the Living Christ with the gift of peace. Paul tells us that the resurrection is but the beginning of the Reign of God:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ (I Corinthians 15:20-22).

God has gifted us in the creation, in the incarnation of the Word of God, in the sacrificial life and death of God’s Messiah, and in the resurrection of Jesus—the Living Christ. Why do our finite minds have trouble believing the infinite goodness God has bestowed? Perhaps one reason is because God’s gifts also carry the responsibility to use them wisely. These responsibilities include: hearing the words of God, gathering in a God-centered community, believing the divine promise of peace and restoration, discerning God’s will for us at our place in history, and putting our faith into practice. But being responsible is not always fun—or even easy.

Nevertheless, with Adam and the two trustworthy servants, we have the responsibility to invest that portion of God’s goodness—whether small or large—that has been entrusted to each of us. We are privileged to join in co-creating more goodness. With Isaiah and with the five wise maidens, we have the responsibility to oil the lamps of peace. We are privileged to join in co-preparing the world for the Prince of Peace. With Micah

and with the sheep at the Last Judgment we have the responsibility to lift up justice, mercy, and humility. We are privileged to join in co-restoring the *shalom* of God, which includes the wholeness of justice **and** peace, to a fallen world.

How do those of us who have been privileged to experience God's goodness approach the responsibilities of being co-creators, co-preparers, and co-restorers? How do we practice our faith in God's divine promise? With the guidance and help of God, we strive to practice our faith by following Jesus. With the encouragement, discernment, and support of our congregations, we strive to live the promise of peace.

Jesus taught us to "love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35-36).

Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good..." (Matthew 5:44-45a).

Jesus declared, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

In a violent world, the road to justice, kindness, humility, love, and the other things that make for peace seems long, bumpy, and lonely. But as followers of The Way of the Prince of Peace, we are not alone—even when we feel alone. We have each other. We have our faith in the divine promise. We also have our ancestors, who have put our shared faith into practice, even in dangerous times. Friends in many centuries and in many cultures have found ways to "seek peace and pursue it."

Most of all we have God. God is already working for peace, having "reconciled us to himself through Christ." Paul assures us that **God "has given us the ministry of reconciliation;** that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (II Corinthians 5:18-19). God's will for earth is a restored community with relationships of integrity, mutual

respect, equality, justice, and peace. God's will is to rest at the center of a restored creation. We affirm this every time we pray as Jesus Christ taught us, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

Jesus made a special promise for those who obey his commandment to love. John's gospel tells us that we will receive God's Spirit of truth (15:26; 16: 13-14). Jesus gave a special name for those who help to restore God's community. This name is "friends" (15:15). Jesus also bestowed a special blessing to his loving friends who help to restore God's community. This blessing has continued—yesterday, today and forever:

**"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God."**

ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper began its life at the 2003 Conference of the Friends Association of Higher Education and Friends Council on Education at Pendle Hill. Mary Lord, Sharon Stout, and I presented a workshop, "Waging peace rooted in the words of Jesus," on June 28. I am grateful to my co-presenters and to our encourager, Earl Redding, all of Adelphi (MD) Friends Meeting in Baltimore Yearly Meeting.
- 2 The end of verse 45 could also be translated, "and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." The Greek root-word that English speakers translate as either "justice" or "righteousness" is the same word in biblical Greek.
- 3 National Council of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of PEACE; God's Promise and Our Response*, (Washington, DC, United States [Roman] Catholic Conference, 1983), p.48-50.
- 4 Mary Garman, et. al, *Hidden in Plain Sight; Quaker Women's Writings, 1650-1700*, Wallingford, PA, Pendle Hill, 1996, p.43.

- 5 2000 General Conference, United Methodist Church, *Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, 2001-2004* (Washington, DC, General Board of Church and Society, 2000, p.43 [Paragraph #164, V. The Political Community, G] Military Service).
- 6 Translations will differ because of the Hebrew word used here, *ruah*, or in Hebrew letters, רוּחַ. This means “spirit,” “breath” or “wind.” Its Greek counterpart (which is used in the Septuagint Bible), *pneuma*, or in Greek letters, πνεῦμα, also means “spirit,” “breath,” or “wind.”
- 7 I think Phyllis Tribble first suggested translating *adam*, or in Hebrew letters, אָדָם, as “the earthling.” It brings out the Hebrew play on words—from the earth, or in Hebrew letters אֶרֶץ, came the earthling. Hebrew Scripture delights in word play! This “earthling” translation is also in keeping with the more rustic nature of the Genesis 2 text. In other translations, the word *adam* is translated as the personal name, Adam, when used without the Hebrew article, or, when used with the article, variously as “the man” or “the human” or as “mankind” or “humankind.” In verse 2:22, after the creation of woman, new words are introduced. One word is *ish*, which means either “man” or “husband.” The word meaning “woman” or “wife” is also introduced. In the new translation by the Jewish scholar Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, he uses “human” for *adam* and “husband” for *ish*. Everett does not translate *adam* as the personal name Adam until 3:17.
- 8 The Hebrew word translated as “soul” is *nephesh*, the entire being, or that which breathes or that which lives נֶפֶשׁ. This is the same word used in Genesis 2:7.
- 9 Or in Hebrew letters, שְׁלוֹמִים, *shalom*.

- 10 Admittedly Amos held out less hope than most and Isaiah held out more. Still, Amos' pessimism was focused on the Kingdom of Israel, not on Judah or the rest of creation.
- 11 John L. Nickalls, ed, *Journal of George Fox*, Philadelphia, PA, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1985, p.27.
- 12 Ibid, 49.
- 13 Apocalyptic comes from the Greek noun, 'αποκαλυψις, or in English, "apocalypse." The root meaning of the verb is "to reveal." In biblical literature it has been associated with the end times. It has come to mean the vision or revelation of the events preceding the coming of God in judgment, followed by the establishment of the Reign of God on earth. Thus the Book of Revelation is sometimes called the Apocalypse of (or to) John.
- 14 I am using the term "Reign" instead of "Kingdom" (as in the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven). The Greek word used in the Gospels [*basilea* or in Greek letters, Βασιλεια] can refer to the territory (kingdom) of the monarch. But it also means the dynamic activity (reign) of the monarch. I think the Gospel context of this term is more about God's dynamic activity than about geography.
- 15 The Greek word is *sarx* or in Greek letters, σαρξ. From this root we get English words such as "sarcoma" (a fleshy tumor, often malignant) and "sarcophagus" (a tomb or ornamental coffin).

The Biblical Vision of Peace
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