

Education for Peace and Justice
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Jeff Boyd

My Vision of Peace and Justice in Religious Education

The connections between peace, justice and religious education can be explored by asking a series of questions. Core inquiries include: What is the central message of Christianity? That is, what is the gospel, the good news? How can religious education help people grasp this central message? Finally, how can religious education prepare disciples to communicate this good news in word and deed? In this way, education will support individuals, congregations and denominations as they travel along the path of (a) becoming who they need to *be*, (b) learning what they need to *know*, and (c) carrying out what they need to *do* in order to be faithful to the call of God.

The Gospel is Good News

What is the good news? The gospel of Jesus is called the good news of peace (Acts 10:36; Eph. 6:15). The mission and message of Jesus was centered on peace, the revelation of God's kingdom of peace (Rom. 14:17; Is. 9:7). Since Jesus' held a dual focus on our relationship with God and with others (Matt. 22:36-40), we know the peace of the gospel also encompasses both dimensions. The first aspect—peace with God—is hardly controversial among Christians. We know that in and through Christ, God was reconciling the world to Godself (2 Cor. 5:19). This reconciliation means that we are at peace with God.

In contrast, the second element—that the gospel of peace has anything to do with personal and global relations—is less widely held. Do the teachings of Jesus really have any bearing on peace in this world? I believe that Jesus' act of weeping over Jerusalem near the end of his ministry is central to answering this question. Israel had not learned the things that make

for peace (Luke 19:41-42) despite Jesus' efforts to guide their feet in the ways of peace (Luke 1:79), and consequently, the very real destruction of the temple in Jerusalem would be the result. Jesus' peace was certainly an inner peace, but it also had direct implications for the peace of the nation.

Jesus brought the good news of peace. He re-opened the way for communion with God, and he re-connected splintered humanity. In Christ humanity is one again. We are given motivation and wisdom to reconcile with enemies, to love them instead of hate them (Matt. 5:44). We are shown that in Jesus, there can be unity in diversity. Now men and women, slaves and free, and Jews and gentiles are all united in the family of God (Acts 10; Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28). In these relationships of peace, we see justice personified. If we are unified in God, then it would not be *just* for us to remain divided in our concrete relationships. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Bible names justice as a characteristic of who God is and what God prioritizes (e.g., Matt. 23:23; Jer. 9:24; Micah 6:8).

Clearly, peace and justice are God's will on earth, and doing God's will is of critical importance for disciples (Matt. 6:10; 7:21; 28:19-20; Eph. 4:11-16) who faithfully trust, follow, and obey God, even as we wait for the full expression of the kingdom of peace and justice to be revealed (Rev. 14:12; 21-22).

Education for Peace and Justice

The role of religious education then becomes clear. It must enable church members to understand the good news of Jesus' story and kingdom, including the dimensions of peace and justice, as well as prepare them to communicate this reality in the world through their words and actions. Religious education that attempts to accomplish these two goals must be holistic. That is, it must address three facets of human life and experience—being, knowing and doing. *Being*

involves identity. Is my self-concept rooted in the God who loves peace and justice? Do I recognize that I am created in God's image, that I was made to move in harmony with peace and justice, that I am most alive when I experience and help others experience these two forces? As a child of God, is my lens for perceiving and evaluating the world one of peace and justice? Do I trust that my life is in the hand of a just and peaceful God?

Second, is this *being* rooted in a deep *knowledge* of scripture, where we learn how God defines and works for peace and justice? Are members taught the things that make for peace? Is the wisdom found in scripture, psychology, sociology and history communicated in a way that members can readily comprehend? Skills, habits, virtues and attitudes useful for promoting peace and justice in the church and in the world must be developed intentionally. Attitudes to be valued and developed include vulnerability, humility, commitment to the safety of others, and hope.¹ Additionally, skills for peacemakers include truthful speech, attentive listening, alertness to community, community discernment, and mutual accountability.²

Third, is *doing* facilitated and encouraged, or are church members left to experiment with behavior changes on their own? Education cannot merely give knowledge about peace and justice and then move on to other topics to be *known* about. Knowledge must translate into action. We have been sent into the world (John 20:21; 28:18-20). The church, as the collection of disciples forming the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:4-30), is called to demonstrate to the world the character and will of God—God's peace, justice and mercy. In the cycle of learning, *doing* leads to deeper *knowing* and *being* (John 7:17; Jer. 22:16). Taken together, right *being* and *knowing* enable the *doing* of God's will.

¹ Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider, and Paulus Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 76-80.

² *Ibid.*, 80-91.

God's Will on Earth

Jesus taught his disciples to pray that God's will would be done on earth as in heaven (Matt. 6:10). While the fullest expression of this will result from God's intervention and re-creation (Rev. 21 & 22), we are called as individuals and as a collective church to participate in the doing of God's will now (Matt. 7:21; 28:19-20; Eph. 4:11-16). God calls us to “see where God is at work and to be co-workers with God.”³

The basic content of God's will can be discerned by considering a sampling of biblical passages that speak to God's priorities. In Matthew 23:23, justice, mercy and faith are held up as matters of highest importance. These elements are echoed from Micah 6:8, where the three elements required of humanity are to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Similarly, Jeremiah declares God's work in the world: “I am the LORD: I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight” (Jer. 9:24).

To these values should be added peace, though in many regards it is a broad term that encompasses significant aspects of mercy, justice and righteousness rather than stands separately as a discrete value or virtue. In the Hebrew Scriptures, *shalom* refers to well-being, material prosperity, just relationships, and moral integrity.⁴ This concept of peace is further developed in the New Testament to include “the good news from God.”⁵

While this is certainly not an exhaustive review of God's priorities, it is clear that peace, love, justice, compassion and faith are critical components of the character and Kingdom of God. Clearly, the good news of the Kingdom is the *gospel of peace* (Acts 10:36; Rom. 14:17; Eph. 6:15; Is. 9:7). At the macro level then, religious education must be oriented toward supporting

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*

and fostering these values in the world. The following two sub-sections address more directly how religious education can work toward these ends.

Church as Expression of the Kingdom—Cultures of Peace

The church as the collection of disciples forming the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:4-30) is called to demonstrate to the world the character and will of God—God’s peace, justice and mercy. That is, as a culture of peace, the church embodies God’s values and puts them on display for the world. Therefore, religious education must build up in members and congregations a countercultural consciousness that sees “the church as God’s alternative community.”⁶ As an alternative community, it displays God’s priorities by working for the things that make for peace. “[T]he faith community is to attend to every aspect of human life and to seek the integration of the religious, social, political, and economic dimensions on behalf of justice and *shalom* (or fullness of life) for all people.”⁷

An example of the reconciling and uniting community of God is the story of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10. This unexpected unity in diversity shows that “God’s family will be multi-cultural, multi-ethnic. It will be drawn from those in every nation who ‘fear God and do justice’—and who are open to God’s forgiving and reconciling work.”⁸

Discipleship—Appropriating the Great Commandments

Ultimately, the example of the church to the world, which is expressed in relationships between disciples as well as in its efforts to work for peace and justice in society, is determined by the capacity of individual disciples to embody the teachings of Jesus—to love God and

⁶ Daniel S. Schipani, *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988), 182.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁸ Kreider, Kreider, and Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church*, 16.

neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40). Religious education must enable individual persons to follow the way of Jesus in all areas of life. Schipani summarizes:

[T]he overall aim of Christian religious education is to enable people to appropriate the gospel of the reign of God by existentially responding to the call of conversion and discipleship in the midst of the ecclesial community which is to promote social transformation for the increase of freedom, justice, and peace; make accessible knowing and loving God; and foster human emergence, wholeness, and fulfillment.⁹

Conflict Resolution

Discipleship—the commitment to following Jesus—must include conflict resolution because Jesus taught reconciliation as a precursor to worship. “So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God” (Matt. 5:23-24).

In Matthew 18, Jesus provides further instructions regarding incremental steps to be taken when attempting to resolve a dispute. These include one-on-one meetings (v. 15), private meetings with two or three witnesses (v. 16), church meetings (v. 17), and some form of distance (v. 17). Furthermore, underlying this process is the notion of forgiveness, which is to be offered seventy times seven (vs. 21-23).

The biblical rationale for putting forth this level of effort in reconciling has deep implications for evangelism. In John 17:21-23, Jesus prays to the Father: “May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me....and that you love them as you love me.” Similarly, Ellen White, a prominent early Seventh-day Adventist leader, states that “Christ will abide in every heart, guiding, comforting, sanctifying, and presenting to the world the unity of the

⁹ Schipani, *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology*, 192.

followers of Jesus.”¹⁰ She proceeds to call this unity the church’s “heavenly credentials.” Our ability to communicate to the world the reality of Jesus and his love is intimately connected to the ability to work through our arguments, misunderstandings, and differences as we find unity in diversity. Although conflict is uncomfortable for many people, we must recognize that “conflict is natural” and “simply part of the territory of life.”¹¹ Rather than attempt to avoid life’s inevitable conflicts, we can be encouraged to know that struggling to resolve and transform conflicts has an impact on God’s kingdom, not just our personal relationships.

Building on the teachings of Jesus, Ken Sande teaches the 4 Gs of Christian conflict resolution.¹² First, to “Glorify God,” one may ask, “How can I please and honor God in this situation?”¹³ This question changes our focus from ourselves—getting what we want out of a conflict—to God. Second, “Get the log out of your eye” is based on Matthew 7:3-5. In this step, a person asks, “How can I show Jesus’ work in me by taking responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?”¹⁴ Rather than blame the other party for the entire problem, each side must introspectively acknowledge their role. This step helps combat a common phenomenon John Paul Lederach describes in this way: “Rather than sharing responsibility for the problems with the other person, we begin to see *the other person as the problem*.”¹⁵

Third, “Gently restore,” embodies Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 18 that were noted above. The wisdom of Galatians 6:1 is pursued by asking, “How can I lovingly serve others by helping

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 385.

¹¹ Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, “Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation,” in *Making Peace with Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*, ed. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 29.

¹² Bruce Boyd, my father’s cousin who teaches religion at Canadian University College, teaches Sande’s 4 Gs in an undergraduate conflict resolution class. I interviewed Bruce for the Viewpoints series at *Adventist Today*, which can be accessed at <http://www.atoday.com/viewpoints-vol-3-dr-bruce-boyd>.

¹³ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁵ John Paul Lederach, *The Journey toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 105.

them take responsibility for their contribution to this conflict?”¹⁶ To be proactive in this work is to embody what David Augsburger terms *care-fronting*. “Care-fronting is loving and level conversation. It unites the love one has for the other with the honest truth that I am able to see about the two of us”¹⁷

The fourth G is “Go and be reconciled” (Matt. 5:24), which asks “How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?”¹⁸ Critically important to this reconciliation is forgiveness, both decisional and emotional. “*Decisional forgiveness* is controlling our behavioral intentions. *Emotional forgiveness* is experiencing emotional replacement of negative, unforgiving emotions with positive, other-oriented emotions.”¹⁹

When repentance and forgiveness lead to a reconciled relationship, we know that the Spirit has empowered us to participate in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-20). Because relational reconciliation takes time, it can be understood as a journey rather than an achievement or event.²⁰ Similarly, Lederach believes “reconciliation is a journey *toward* and *through* conflict.”²¹ He goes on to describe this journey in more detail:

It begins with a personal journey within, for the purpose of identifying the source of pain, what is wrong, and understanding it. The process then moves us toward

¹⁶ Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 139.

¹⁷ David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Confront: How to Understand and Express Your Deepest Feelings toward Others*, 3rd ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2009), 10.

¹⁸ Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 201.

¹⁹ Everett L. Worthington Jr., *A Just Forgiveness: Responsible Healing without Excusing Injustice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 74-75.

²⁰ Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 57.

²¹ Lederach, *The Journey toward Reconciliation*, 23.

the source of our anxiety and pain that is welling up in the relationship. What rises from this journey is commitment to relationship and interdependence.²²

Conclusion

Religious education is at its best when it takes seriously the heart of peace and justice in the gospel and prepares members to demonstrate these kingdom values in concrete ways with each other and with non-Christians in the world. The truth of Jesus is not merely propositional and fully embodied in word or argumentation; it must be lived and put on display for the world. When the world sees that unity in diversity is possible—that conflict can be overcome—the message of God’s redeeming love will have increased power to attract people to God’s kingdom and give them strength to become kingdom citizens.

²² Ibid., 138.

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