

SESSION 3

Purpose: By the end of this session, participants will have explored four biblical texts in the search for a Christian understanding of peace.

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Materials Needed: copies of the *Foundation Document*, newsprint and marker, Bibles, paper, and pencils.

1 Summarize the process by which and the purpose for which the *Foundation Document* was written by the United Methodist Council of Bishops (pages 9-10, 11). Note that the bishops are seeking three things in offering this document: (1) to state clearly their convictions about the issues of the nuclear crisis and a just peace; (2) to evoke a full and fair discussion of these issues across the denomination, including the offering and discussion of alternative convictions; and (3) to urge the people called United Methodist to do the things that work for peace.

2 Write on a newsprint sheet the heading "What does peace mean?" Ask participants to share their definition of the word *peace*. Write these on the newsprint. Discuss the list of meanings you as a group have developed. If no one has mentioned it yet, ask what relation *justice* (which they will also need to work at defining) has to *peace*.

Explain that in their document, the bishops are concerned with more than the crucially important matter of avoiding the horror of a nuclear war. They seek also to go beyond the avoidance of war to the construction of a just peace.

Explain to the group that, following the bishops' lead, they will be employing the four guidelines for theological discernment known as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral": Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In this session, you will use the first of these: Scripture. Note the affirmation on page 23: "For United Methodists today, as for John Wesley two centuries ago, the Bible is the ultimate source of knowledge and authority."

3 Divide the group into teams of three, each team having access to at least one Bible. Ask the teams to read Ezekiel 34:25-31. Then ask them within their teams to list images used by Ezekiel that express positive qualities they would desire to experience.

List these images on newsprint as the teams report.

Explain that Ezekiel lived in a desolate time for his people. It was the time of the Exile in Babylon, when the Judean homeland had been ravaged, their capital of Jerusalem destroyed, and the political and religious leaders taken as hostages to Babylon. It was a time with little room for illusions. In the midst of such times, Ezekiel prophesied these words of hope from God, promising a day of restoration and a "covenant of peace."

The images contained in this prophesy of Ezekiel begin to point at what the Bible understands as *peace*, as the bishops note in the *Foundation Document* (page 24):

"At the heart of the Old Testament is the testimony to *shalom*, that marvelous Hebrew word that means peace. But the peace that is *shalom* is not negative or one-dimensional. It is much more than the absence of war. *Shalom* is positive peace: harmony, wholeness, health, and well-being in all human relationships. It is the natural state of humanity as birthed by God. It is harmony between humanity and all of God's good creation. All of creation is interrelated. Every creature, every element, every force of nature participates in the whole of creation. If any person is denied *shalom*, all are thereby diminished."

4 A key set of verses that offers much of what Jesus had to say about the things that make for peace can be found in his Sermon on the Mount. Write the words of Matthew 5:9 on newsprint. Ask participants to offer paraphrases of this verse. Be sure to note at some point that those who are blessed as God's children are those who actively *make* peace, not just those who are *peaceful*.

Jesus offered a description of what it looks like for one to be a peacemaker later in this same chapter. Read, or have a participant read aloud, Matthew 5:38-48. Hold a discussion on this text around such questions as:

- What would happen if you tried to live this way in your personal relations?
- What would happen if you tried to live this way as a society or nation?
- What would happen if you did *not* live this way?
- What are some specific, concrete ways in which Christians might turn the other cheek? love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them?

- How might loving one's enemies lead to Christians having to take up their crosses?

5 The bishops observe that "ultimately, New Testament faith is a message of hope about God's plan and purpose for human destiny. It is a redemptive vision that refuses to wallow in doom" (page 28). New Testament faith centers on the redemption God brings in the costly, bloody, loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In the cross and empty tomb, God overthrows the chaotic power of sin, brings a rebellious humanity back into relationship with God, and eliminates all need of divisions and hostility.

Have a participant read aloud Ephesians 2:11-22. Write the following words on newsprint: *peace, redemption, reconciliation, cross, and church*. Ask participants to work out how these words are related to one another according to their reading of Ephesians 2:11-22. If they need help getting started, ask them to respond to one or both of these quotations:

"The ultimate divine purpose to bring the whole created universe into an all-embracing unity is foreshadowed, and indeed is actually begun, in the church, where a divided humanity is brought together as Jew and Gentile are united in a single worshipping community."¹

"Paul was obviously unable to imagine a peace given by God to those far and near which would not also be a peace *between* the two. Peace is not simply a matter of the soul or of individuals only; if it is peace from and with God, then it is also peace among men. Only by changing man's social relations does God also change man's individual life."²

6 Many Christians base their support of national defense and military policies on Romans 13: Christians are to subject themselves to the political authorities. Other, equally sincere Christians ask whether subjection to the government is to be unqualified and ultimate.

Divide the group into three teams. Assign one of the following passages to each team and ask team members to prepare a summarizing paraphrase of their passage: Romans 12:14-21; Romans 13:1-7; Romans 13:8-10.

When the teams report their paraphrases, point out that these three passages follow one another in the text of the Letter to the Romans. Have the whole group negotiate a summary of the sense of all three.

The apostle Paul, as a citizen of the Roman Empire, respected the Empire for the good it offered the world

and the Christian mission. The Empire built the roads along which Paul traveled. It kept travelers on those roads relatively safe from robbers. Its law restrained some of the worst consequences of human sin. In many ways, Caesar and his government were good stewards of the political power God had granted them. Paul referred to the government specifically as "God's servant for your good" (Romans 13:4). Paul had confidence in the political system of his day, and consistently subjected himself to Caesar's judgment (see Acts 25:8-12).

However, governments are only *stewards* of political power, without legitimacy and authority of their own. For the Christian, first and ultimate loyalty belongs solely to God. The Christian lives in this world, but is not to be "conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2). The Christian respects the good role the state plays in the world, and submits to (places herself or himself under) its authority. Yet the Christian might find it necessary, due to ultimate loyalty to God, to disobey the government while submitting to the penalties the government imposes. As Bible scholar Victor Paul Furnish notes, "The opposite of 'subjection' is not so much 'disobedience' as 'disruption.'"³

Discuss with group members how their understanding of Romans 12:14-13:10 affects their support as Christians for national defense and military policies. Would it make any difference whether a Christian was a citizen of the United States, the Soviet Union, Poland, Switzerland, South Africa, or Iran? How would the group counsel United Methodists who live in Warsaw Pact countries, such as Poland, the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Czechoslovakia, or the Soviet Union, to relate to their governments?

7 Invite participants to state aloud any insights or questions that have come to their attention during this session. Then close with the following benediction:

Christ is our peace.

Christ has reconciled us to God.

Christ has reconciled us one to the other.

The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us offer one another a sign of peace.

(Group members may exchange a sign of peace with a handclasp, saying: "Peace be with you." "And also with you.")

¹From "The Epistle to the Ephesians," by Francis W. Beare, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. X (Abingdon, 1953); pages 648-49. Used by permission.

²Excerpt from *Anchor Bible: Ephesians*, translated by Markus Barth. Copyright © 1974 by Doubleday & Company, Inc.; page 278. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

³From *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, by Victor Paul Furnish (Abingdon, 1979); page 127. Used by permission.