

# BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

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*1st Marines Division land on Guadalcanal in a LCP(R) in August, 1942. Sherman Montrose. Source: Pritzker Military Museum & Library.*

**T**he biblical concept of peace is hardly touched when defined simply as the absence of external conflict or war, or the simple presence of inner tranquility. The operative word in Hebrew is *shalom*, which traces its roots to several Semitic languages. At its core, *shalom* designates a state of wholeness, harmony, and completeness—it points to the way things *ought* to be.

The prophets used *shalom* to convey the blessings for God’s people associated with the coming of the Messiah. Grounded in the presence of justice and order, conditions required for human flourishing, biblical peace is comprehensive welfare extending in every direction. Following the prophets, Thomas Aquinas understood that peace cannot be present where there is no justice (Is. 5:9). Peace, then, is not a virtue, per se; it is the fruit of virtue (Is. 48:18).

The Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Bible—translates *shalom* as *irene*. One Dominical mandate for Christ followers, therefore, is to be irenic—to be aimed at peace. Christians are called to be peacemakers.

Andrew Fulford, in his excellent essay in this issue, notes the pacifist preference for the red-letter bits of scripture including, above all else, the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5). Pacifists will probably agree that of all the Beatitudes of Jesus, the call to be peacemakers

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has a unique muscularity. Whereas the others point to an attitude to be cultivated, the call to be peacemakers demands a particularly concrete action. But here is where agreement ends.

Far too often, the Christian understanding of peace has withered. Overly spiritualized, peace is predominately identified as an inner feeling of serenity. The muscularity of the injunction to be a peacemaker has atrophied. Rendered maudlin, peacemaking is sanitized of anything deemed morally uncomfortable, including the necessity of the peacemaker to stand in judgment.

This is a far cry from the Sermon on the Mount. Peacemakers, remember, look a lot like God. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus proclaims, “for they will be called sons of God.” Presented as a cumulative character description, the constituent elements of the Beatitudes—the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteous, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers—roll together, each gathering one into the others, until they form a comprehensive aggregate able to be recognized as “a Son of God.” This is really saying something.

In Semitic thought, “sonship” is used figuratively to signify the idea that a person shares the qualities—the nature—of the fatherly figure specified. So, the first question to ask is what kind of peacemaker is God? Doing so reveals that, at the very least, peacemakers are those willing to confront hard issues with integrity in order to end hostilities and to bring the contending adversaries together.

As God’s career in this regard makes plain, the establishment of right relationships between fallen people—and between fallen people and their God—is never easy. The biblical scholar Frederick Dale Bruner alerts us to the nature of peacemaking:

Struggle, confrontation, and partisan engagement...we bring peace today when we enlist people in warfare against evil struggles... The circle of right relations that

is peace will often, in a crooked world, be relations that pass through struggle and confrontation.

Similarly, Reinhold Niebuhr, writing just after the horrors of WWII, chided those Christians who had shrunk from the hard duty—the struggle and confrontation—of opposing Nazi and Japanese tyranny with military force. The peace of God, he insisted, must never be equated with the peace of detachment. In this, at least, Niebuhr was following in the line of Augustine, who understood war to be, tragically, necessary for the recovery and continued maintenance of a peace durable enough to hold firm against the conditions of the world. It pays to remember, as Jean Bethke Elshtain asserted, that Augustine was talking about the peace of the *Pax Romana*—compelled or ordered peace—that, however unjust in the full light of eschatological *shalom*, was nevertheless very real and very significant. More than any competitor then on the market, the Roman *pax* was capable of keeping neighbor from eating neighbor, and of preserving the interconnected web of culture, civilization, art, and tradition that, by Augustine’s day, was well in jeopardy. The approximate good of ordered peace is most often better than unadulterated anarchy.

Much better still is Augustine’s notion of *tranquillitas ordinis*—the tranquility, or peace, of order. Such peace is not externally compelled but rather internally prompted by love of God and neighbor. This peace, Augustine writes in *The City of God*, is born of a commitment that “one will be at peace, as far as lies in him, with all men.” The basis of this commitment is “the observance of two rules: first, do no harm to anyone, and, secondly, to help everyone whenever possible.” This will not result, Elshtain cautioned, in “the perfect peace promised to believers in the Kingdom of God, the one in which the lion lies down with the lamb.” Against this vain hope Elshtain frequently reminded us that “on this earth, if the lion lies down with the lamb, the lamb must be replaced frequently.”

Nevertheless, Elshtain saw this pursuit of a *tranquillitas ordinis* running in a bright line



*A US Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt II—the beloved “Warthog”—drops an AGM-65 Maverick missile during a close air support training mission. Senior Airman Brett Clashman. Source: U.S. Air Force.*

from Augustine to the US Constitution. The establishment of measures to ensure security and public safety promoted “domestic tranquility” as central to what the new order being created after the American Revolution was all about. Peace was to be the product of order and justice, without which no other political goods could long perdure. What political goods did she have in mind? As she noted in *Just War Against Terror*, simply the quotidian ones:

Mothers and fathers raising their children; men and women going to work; citizens of a great city making their way on streets and subways; ordinary people flying to California to visit their grandchildren or to transact business with colleagues—all of these actions are simple but profound goods made possible by civic peace. They include the faithful attending their churches, synagogues, and mosques without fear, and citizens—men and women, young and old, black, brown, and white—lining up to vote on Election Day.

In such a vision, the Beatitudes and founding principles enter the same conceptual orbit. The term “blessing” in Christ’s sermon requires some nuance. In the Vulgate, the Latin term for “blessed” can be translated “happiness.” But this does point to a subjective feeling, but rather an objective fact. The Founder’s declaration that all people are endowed by our Creator with the right to the “pursuit of happiness” points to something similar. The Founders aren’t pledging their lives and sacred honor on the right of Americans to enjoy a gassy kind of happiness that can be attained in this, that, or any old way. “Happiness” has a peripatetic connotation—it points to the enjoyment of those conditions that allow human beings—made in the image of God—to flourish. It requires a specific eco-system built for both body and soul. So, Jesus and Jefferson want us to be happy, but both are pointing to an objective reality, not merely a subjective feeling. Wonderful is the life or occasion in which both the objective and subjective align. But, as an earlier Beatitude assures us, even those who mourn can be happy.

Glossing on what can be gleaned from the Beatitudes, there are obvious attitudinal characteristics of the peacemaker that can be drawn from Augustine. Looking at his letter to Boniface, the military commander of the Roman army in North Africa, we see Augustine cautioning the commander to “cherish the spirit of the peacemaker.” Augustine exhorts him to recognize that it is necessity, and not one’s own will, which prompts the conscientious warrior to “slay the enemy” who fights against him. Force is always only the form love takes against terrible evil in the last resort when nothing else will protect the innocent, restore justice, and bring about the conditions for peace. The old Chestertonian nugget remains: “The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him.”

Moreover, the peacemaker, when compelled to fight, doesn’t do so in the negation of peace, but rather with the end of peace foremost in mind as the chiefly desired object. While



*Training toward peace: Marines and sailors conduct an attack on range 400 at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif. 2016. Petty Officer 1st Class Nathan Laird. Source: Department of Defense.*

fighting with the aim of peace promotes awareness that there are certain ways of fighting that better allow for the possibility of presently warring peoples to come together in concord at the cessation of belligerence, it does not negate the belligerence. Responsible sovereigns—the authority over whom there is no one greater charged with the care of the political community—might sometimes determine that nothing else will retribute a sufficiently grave evil, take back what has wrongly been taken, or to protect the innocent. Nor does it mean that belligerence won't be terribly violent.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur understood this. When he announced his retirement in 1951 to a Joint Session of Congress, he declared that he considered himself simply “an old soldier who has tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty.” That duty, he understood, was to “to destroy” in order “to build up.” Nowhere was such a sense of duty more on display than in the Pacific. The war with the Japanese was a bloodletting characterized by its staggering brutality. After

Pearl Harbor, Bataan, Guadalcanal, Okinawa, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, the peace that now exists between America and Japan is almost miraculous.

MacArthur had no doubt of the task that followed the Japanese surrender. He knew that despite the government finally agreeing to stand down, there was no guarantee that the proud soldiers, sailors, airmen, and civilians of Japan would not match their pride with defiance and insurgency. Surrender, the cessation of open conflict, did not yet mean peace. But MacArthur understood that the Allied treatment of Emperor Hirohito, the divine authority for the Japanese, would have a tremendous influence on the prospects of real peace and reconciliation. He warned against the impulse of some among the Allies who wanted to prosecute the emperor for war crimes. MacArthur won out. He left Hirohito in his imperial position—if with only a modicum more than symbolic power—and utilized the emperor to ensure continuity of control and authority over the Japanese people, both military and civilian.

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MacArthur's demonstration of respect for core Japanese values and his understanding of the benefits of forgiveness and appropriate absolution allowed the once-warring nations to move on—and to face the new communist threats arrayed against their mutual interests.

This is the same MacArthur who always argued for a strong US military, a robust forward presence, a credible nuclear arsenal, and the martial resolve to convince adversaries of our willingness to fight to protect our interests. This is what peacemaking looks like. Warfighting can be a divine vocation.

Of course, just as the peacemaker is not to avoid the obligation to use force when the obligation confronts him, neither is he to too eagerly employ it. Christians are not to use the inevitability of tension with the world as an excuse to seek, encourage, or unnecessarily stoke conflict. When either non-violence or violence will properly retribute a gross injustice, vindicate victims, or protect the innocent, the Christian will choose non-violence. Nor will a peacemaker ever inaugurate new violence. But sometimes there *is* no choice between violence or non-violence. Sometimes our enemies have already made violence a fact, and nothing but fighting will stop them. Paul's injunction, "In so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men," is a commitment to force as last resort. We are to do whatever we legitimately can to make peace with our enemies, including praying that God would bless them and work in their conscience to stand down. More than this, we are to take those early and positive steps to do good in the world, alleviating, where we are able, cause for animosity. Nevertheless, there are,

indeed, no sure ways to soften hard hearts, and the practice of peace has restrictions.

Peace at the price of truth is not asked for. The Christian, because he is a Christian, cannot do such things. "As far as it depends on you" is not just a goad toward peace, but also a limit: you, given who you are, redeemed by Christ and created to carry the image of God, are called to preserve peace. But you, given who you are, have no call—nor right—to trump the veto of those who refuse to reciprocate your peaceful endeavors. Our enemies have a vote whether peace will prevail.

For Augustine, the impossibility of peace was a tragedy. He lamented: "A just war is justified only by the injustice of an aggressor, and that injustice ought to be a source of grief to any good man, because it is a human injustice." Given the heavy nature of this task, the demeanor of the Christian soldier was paramount; Augustine insisted that "no one is fit for inflicting this punishment except the man who, by the greatness of his love, has overcome that hatred wherewith those are wont to be inflamed who wish only to avenge themselves."

For Aquinas, standing in the Augustinian stream, the goal of conflict was clear. "[B]e peaceful, therefore, in warring," he said, "so that you may vanquish those whom you war against and bring them in the prosperity of peace."

And then let us be happy together. P

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