

EVANGELICAL REUNION¹

Appendix 1: "Peacemakers" – A Sermon by Dennis Johnson²

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God (Matt. 5:9)

Copyright © 1991 by Baker Book House Co. Published by Baker Book House. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved. This material is for personal use only and cannot be published in any form without written permission. This material is not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in any form or in other media either in whole or part, or mirrored at other web sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.

Christ calls you to a complicated, painful, and blessed task: *making peace*. It is not a task at which leaders in Reformed or Evangelical churches are especially good. I suspect that it is not a top priority in prospective students' choice of seminary: "I want to become a peacemaker, so I'm going to Westminster." For many of us the picture that stirs our imagination is that of Christian soldiers marching into war against the forces of atheism, liberalism, pragmatism, and sometimes anything and anyone that is less than 99.44% pure presuppositional, biblical-theological, nouthetic Calvinism. The denominations in which we serve were born out of the trauma of doctrinal conflict over central truths of God's Word. Those conflicts were necessary and right. So we *know* that it's right to contend valiantly for the truth; but we're not so sure about whether it's okay to get along with Christians who don't see the truth exactly as we do.

A Complicated Task

To be a *biblical* peacemaker, you need to develop a bias toward compromise on unimportant points, rather than insisting on confrontation at every point of disagreement. You need to be willing to place a priority on the common ground that Christians share, rather than focusing exclusively on our differences. You need to be willing to place the best interpretation on the motives and actions of others, rather than approaching them suspiciously, assuming the worst about their hidden agendas. And you need a lot of patient trust in God, that he will show them where they are wrong – and *you* where *you* are wrong!

But this is what makes this job so complicated: Which *are* the unimportant points of difference on which you can compromise for the present? What if the pragmatic methods that your brother uses in evangelism really *are* rooted in a

¹ John Frame is the author of the titular work.

² © All rights reserved Westminster Theological Seminary in California, 1997. Dennis E. Johnson is Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

man-centered gospel, or motivated by a thirst for power and fame rather than in compassion for sinful people and a passion for the glory of God? God's peace does not peacefully coexist with falsehood, sham, or injustice; so God's peacemakers cannot just ignore peace-destroying sin and error any more than a surgeon can simply close up an infected wound: an abscess is bound to develop.

And yet, on the other hand, "love *does* cover a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). What sins or differences of conviction can be covered? Which ones must be confronted in humble love for your brother or sister? It's a complicated task, and because of that it is also...

A Painful Task

Making peace is not easy. To be a peacemaker you have to become the person that all the other Beatitudes describe. Peacemaking demands that you be *poor in spirit*, humble enough to admit that you have been wrong and to ask forgiveness (as Jesus commands later in this sermon, Matt. 5:23-24). It demands *meekness*, which shows itself in the self-control to hold your tongue, to refuse to use the truth sometimes, even though it would vindicate your cause and blow your opponent out of the water (Matt. 5:22). It demands that the stains and the schisms in the church, the body of Christ, bother you – a lot! – so that you *mourn* as you survey the ravages of sin in yourself and your brothers and sisters.

And sometimes peacemaking is painful because the Christians among whom you are trying to make peace will disagree with you on whether compromise or confrontation is the way to peace in a particular situation. They may just think you have poor judgment; they may think you are naively optimistic, theologically undiscerning, etc.: "If you *really* understood the underlying theological issues, the actual motivations of our opponents, you would know that peace will never come through negotiation or compromise, but only through the opponents' unconditional surrender." Or they may suspect *your* motives, too: "Why aren't you willing to pay the price to contend for the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints?" Peacemakers can look like cowardly "pleasers of men" when they are compared with bold champions who courageously disregard the opinions and feelings of human beings.

My hunch is that Barnabas was more characteristically a peacemaker than was Paul. Could this have been the source of their friction over taking John Mark along on a second trip (Acts 15:36-41)? Barnabas wanted to give Mark a second chance. But from Paul's perspective, perhaps, Barnabas looked naïve when he hoped that Mark had learned his lesson from his first desertion. So they disagreed – sharply! They argued. And biblical peace was fractured. Now, I've heard this passage used to justify denominationalism, but I think you have to say that the Holy Spirit was *not* smiling in approval as he caused Luke to report this scene. *Somebody* was in the wrong. Maybe Paul was right and Barnabas was

wrong: Mark wasn't ready yet. Maybe Barnabas was right: later Paul did appreciate Mark's ministry (2 Tim. 4:11). In any case, Barnabas the peacemaker *looked* wrong to Paul, and neither man would budge.

If you set out to be a peacemaker in Christ's church, you will not always make the right choice about how to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And even when you do make the right choice, it's going to look wrong to lots of people: to some, too tolerant; to others, too rigid. You can't win... Or can you?

A Blessed Task

The task is blessed because Jesus says so, and he announces the amazing honor which will be bestowed on peacemakers at the last judgment: "They will be called the sons of God." Or, to make plain the real Subject who stands behind this divine passive: "*God* will call them his sons."

In one way or another, all of the promises of the Beatitudes are promises of eternal life and joy in the kingdom of God. But each promise focuses on a particular aspect of that complete salvation. What is the special focus of being called by God as his sons?

As sons, peacemakers are *in tune with the Father's purpose*. God's goal is peace, not conflict; unity, not division and hostility. A pastor of the congregation in which I worship was preaching on James's description of heavenly wisdom: "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (Jam. 3:18). He observed that righteousness does not grow in an environment of strife, competition, and hostility. Farming may not be as exciting as the battlefield, but the patient planting and watering of reconciliation, patience, and forgiveness produces the fruit of righteous lives and attitudes which delight our Father. Make it your goal to *win over* those who differ from you rather than simply to *win* over them, and you will show that you are pursuing the purpose of the Father.

As sons, peacemakers also *reflect the image of God's Son*. If you think that peacemaking is painful for you, look at Jesus. If you are hurting from the criticism that you have had to absorb in your efforts to promote peace in Christ's church, consider the price he paid for our peace. Christ's purpose "was to create in himself one new man out of two, thus *making peace*, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God *through the cross*, by which he put to death their hostility" (Eph. 2:15-16). Peacemakers are blessed, despite the pain and the criticism, because in them is reflected the peacemaking grace of the Son of God, who gave himself to reconcile us to God and to each other.

I have a dream. Actually, I have a lot of dreams for Westminster in California, as many of us do. But here is one of mine: When public awareness

surveys about seminaries are taken in future years, knowledgeable Christians will say about Westminster in California, "That school is committed to the lordship of Christ, the authority of Scripture, the Reformed faith, the high standards of scholarship; *and that school is committed to producing peacemakers*. That seminary is committed to a loving, patient, gentle, even *tolerant* pursuit of peace with all kinds of Christians, including those who are not as committed as Westminster is to Christ's lordship, the Bible, Reformed theology, and scholarship." My hope is that the day will come when if a church is facing trauma and turmoil and is in need of healing, its leaders will say, "We need a Westminster in California graduate to lead us by his example and his teaching, so that we will learn to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

It is complicated and painful, but it is also a blessed task to be peacemakers, showing the precious patience of the Son of God, who has made us God's sons. And it is *your* task as a disciple of Jesus the Son, the Peacemaker.

Copyright © 1991 by Baker Book House Co. Published by Baker Book House. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved. This material is for personal use only and cannot be published in any form without written permission. This material is not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in any form or in other media either in whole or part, or mirrored at other web sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.