

# Church of the Brethren CALL OF CONSCIENCE



## SESSION 2 Going by the Book

### What the Bible Says about Peace and Violence

#### Bible background for leaders

What does the Bible say about peace, justice, and nonviolence? A lot! The Bible is a book that reveals who God is and God's plan for salvation. God is a God of love who makes a covenant with the people. And even though the people are disobedient, God saves them over and over. God is always ready to redeem a fallen world.

- When the people are unfaithful in the beginning of time, God starts over with Noah and his family, saving creation from a devastating flood and making a covenant with them to protect them. (See the story of Noah's Ark in Genesis 9.)
- And when God's people are slaves in Egypt, God rescues them and gives them a land to live in as long as they are faithful. (See the story of the Exodus in the Book of Exodus.)
- Later, after the Babylonians overrun the kingdom of Judah, including the holy city of Jerusalem, and drive the Jews into exile, God brings them back and starts over with a joyful homecoming. (See the story of Cyrus who liberates the Jews in Babylon and ends the Exile, in Ezra 1.)

The most dramatic saving act, however, comes in the New Testament when the Jews are living under Roman occupation and the future for God's people looks very dim. At that point in history, God sends Jesus into the world to reconcile the world to him. God

### Purpose of this session

- To see the salvation story in the Bible as a story about peace
- To become familiar with specific Bible stories about peace
- To learn how use a Bible commentary
- To help youth begin to ground their peace position in the Bible

### Ahead of time

Cut apart the verses on one copy of the Scripture handout and place strips into a basket.



accomplishes that reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ. God gives the very best hope to the world, and when the world kills that hope, God begins again, defeating death and sin and resurrecting Jesus, sending the Holy Spirit to lead the people in the way of righteousness. Once and for all, God saves.

God continues to accomplish that reconciliation through the life and teachings of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus give us the clearest picture of what our unknowable God is like and what God expects from us as followers. The teachings of Jesus, which are many, can perhaps best be summed up in the Great Commandment. When the Pharisees ask Jesus what the greatest commandment is, he responds, capturing the whole New Testament in two sentences: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:34-40). To love your neighbor includes love of friends as well as enemies, saints as well as sinners, the lovable as well as people who are difficult to love. And by loving even the “least of these” (Matthew 25), we love God. That’s the Bible in a nutshell. And that’s the gospel of peace.

Of course, to be loving, forgiving, and peaceful is not easy. Jesus warns his followers about that. He knew that the way of peace would be difficult and tells the disciples they must “count the cost” (Luke 14:28). In other words, they should know what they’re up against and, if they can still be faithful in the face of persecution, they will be true disciples. That’s true for conscientious objectors, too. It won’t be easy and it will require a conscious decision—counting the cost—but the rewards can be deeply fulfilling.

Brethren often ground our peace position in the Gospels of the New Testament, but themes of peace appear throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. In Greek, another ancient Bible language, the word for peace is *eirene*. Both words are used in the Bible to refer to peace in society and peace in our souls. These two forms of peace are the result of living according to the will of God. Ezekiel 34:24-27 lays out for us God’s plan of peace. If we will live in covenant with God and live according to the plan of God, which is based on justice, mercy, and peace, we will experience all the blessings of God’s love. That is not to say that we will never suffer or that we will never experience conflict. We are prone to make many mistakes and life is finite. But to the extent that we can experience the peace God intended for the world, we, like the Bible, must reject violence, injustice, and hatred.

In the New Testament epistles (that is, letters), such as 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans, Paul talks about this “way” of life in the kingdom of God. The “way” includes caring for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. It requires justice for the downtrodden and love for those who hate us.

First Peter 2 is a good summary of the life God intends and how we should live as Christians who are called to be a “peculiar people”—not peculiar as in strange, but peculiar as in *unique* or *set apart* for just this purpose, to love God and our neighbors. The writer of 1

## Materials you will need

- Bibles for each participant and at least one Bible commentary
- Paper and pencils
- Copies of “Scriptures” handout (plus one extra to cut apart)
- Copies of “Sentence Starters” handout
- Copies of “Questions about Conscientious Objection”
- Copies of “Call of Conscience” handout
- Plain light-colored handkerchiefs or adhesive shelf paper or other material for activity 3. Markers suitable for the material chosen.



Peter tells clearly how this peculiar group of people should live and respond to hatred and violence that has been heaped on them. Early on in the instructions is the advice to return good for evil. The first Christians were, after all, living under persecution by both the Roman authorities and Jewish authorities in Palestine not long after Jesus was executed.

## **A** Connect

Show the 4-minute trailer for “Another World Is Possible,” vol. 1, by Shane Claiborne and Jamie Moffett. Find it here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOwDeoeNLeo> or search the title.

## **B** Set up the session



Introduce this session as an exploration of the Bible to see what it says about peace. Divide into two teams, each with a person to record answers. Give each recorder a sheet of paper and a pen and send teams off to different corners of the room. With a time limit of five minutes, ask each team to write down as many Bible verses as they can think of that mention peace or love. (If you think your group will find it hard to remember verses, provide concordances.) Then, like the word game Boggle, compare the team lists, eliminating duplicates to find out which team recorded the most verses not found on the other’s list.

## **C** Bible study

There are many references to peace and justice in the Bible. In fact peace is one of God’s central messages in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Pass around the basket with the scripture verses that emphasize the gospel of peace and have participants take one. (Pass it multiple times until all the verses are taken.) In a way these scriptures are slogans that carry the whole message of the Bible in a phrase or a few sentences. Give everyone one minute to memorize one of the verses they hold in their hands (or a part, if the verse is long). Then take turns reciting the passages in quick succession in a sort of readers’ theater. As was typical in Jesus’ day, have each person stand to recite scripture when it is his or her turn.

Distribute copies of the “Scriptures of Peace” handout with the full list of peace scriptures. Ask youth to choose a text from this list that they find confusing. Show them how to find an expert explanation by consulting a one-volume Bible commentary such as *Harper’s Bible Commentary* or a multi-volume commentary such as the *Believers Church Commentary Series*.

Have them keep the handout in their journals as a resource for the writing they will do for their CO files.

 **The teachings of Jesus, which are many, can perhaps best be summed up in the Great Commandment.** 

## Things to think about and do

- 1. Sentence starters.** Hand out the sheet of “Sentence Starters.” Break into pairs for five to ten minutes to talk about their responses to these sentences. Send the sheets home for participants to use as questions for reflection in their journals.
- 2. Create worship resources.** Ask youth to each choose a favorite Bible verse from “Scriptures of Peace” and set it to music or develop it into a litany. Or ask them to write two or three sentences of reflection on the text. Have them present their work to the group. (Consider submitting some for use in the church newsletter or a worship service.)
- 3. Turn text into art.** Have youth choose one of the Bible verses for a personal “credo,” a statement of belief, using no more than ten or twelve words. Then use markers to transfer the words to the material that you brought—adhesive shelf liner cut into the size of bumper stickers or plain light-colored handkerchiefs, for example. They may also render the text artistically in their journals.
- 4. Preview the Selective Service questions.** Distribute copies of “Questions about Conscientious Objection” and read through the three parts so that youth can begin thinking about them.

## Closing

Distribute copies of the “Call of Conscience” handout and remind participants to take time for journaling between sessions. Their journal entries will help them develop their CO files.

- 1. Ponder.** Ask participants to consider this question between now and the next session: “What does it mean for me to love my neighbor as myself?”
- 2. Pray.** “God of peace: Help us to love you with heart, soul, and mind—and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.”



## Retreat idea

Watch a production of “Cotton Patch Gospel,” a musical by Tom Key and Russell Treyz with music and lyrics by Harry Chapin. Or watch a production of “Godspell,” a modern-day song and dance version of the Gospel of Matthew.