

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO WAR by Miley Palmer

WAR AND PEACE IN THE BIBLE **SESSION I**

How does a Christian think about events of war, whether it is a civil war in another country, a war between nations in another part of the world, or a war in which our own country is engaged? How do Scripture and tradition shape our questions, inform our thinking, and guide our responses in thought and action?

God's people have been thinking about how to respond to war for a very long time. Christians today enter the conversation with access to a great deal of historical material that offers us information and insight about how God's people have responded in the past in particular situations of discord and conflict. We find stories, poetry, prophetic writings, wisdom, and apocalyptic literature in the biblical witness that may seem confusing to us because they represent divergent responses to the question of how to respond to conflict and war. If we look at the history of the church, again we find divergent responses emerging as Christians in different times, places, and contexts respond to the potential and practice of war. We will be disappointed in both the biblical witness and the history of the church if we are seeking a clearly consistent pronouncement about how to respond to war. The struggle, however, is worth our prayerful and diligent effort in a world where war continues to disrupt and destroy God's people and God's intention for the goodness of the earth as a gift for all.

What Does Scripture Say?

One of the temptations in asking the question about how Christians respond to war is to try to harmonize Scripture to provide a single perspective as guidance on the complex issues of dealing with conflict and war. Another temptation is to read only the passages of Scripture that agree with our own perspective and support our own position. In this study, we will look at a sampling of texts from both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that represent biblical perspectives on war, including passages that speak of God's vision of peace. They are intended to provide an opportunity for reflection and wrestling with the difficult questions of how we respond to war.

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien

resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. ¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

DISCUSSION:

How do the Commandments apply to the issues of war and peace?

I Samuel 15:2-3

²Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. ³Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

Psalms 21:8-13

Your hand will find out all your enemies; your right hand will find out those who hate you. ⁹You will make them like a fiery furnace when you appear. The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath, and fire will consume them. ¹⁰You will destroy their offspring from the earth, and their children from among humankind. ¹¹If they plan evil against you, if they devise mischief, they will not succeed. ¹²For you will put them to flight; you will aim at their faces with your bows.

Psalms 34:11-14

¹¹Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. ¹²Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good? ¹³Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. ¹⁴Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

Psalms 83

¹O God, do not keep silence; do not hold your peace or be still, O God! ²Even now your enemies are in tumult; those who hate you have raised their heads. ⁹Do to them as you did to Midian, as to Sisera and Jabin at the Wadi Kishon, ¹⁰who were destroyed at En-dor, who became dung for the ground.

Psalms 137:8-9

O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! ⁹Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

DISCUSSION:

- 1. Do these passages mean that God wishes us to go to war against oppression?***
- 2. What about self-defense?***
- 3. What about protecting others who are in danger?***

Joel 3:9-10

⁹Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up. ¹⁰Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, "I am a warrior."

Isaiah 2:2-4

²In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

DISCUSSION:

These two passages from Joel and Isaiah seem to contradict one another: plowshares into swords versus swords into plowshares. How do we hold these together as the inspired Word of God?

Isaiah 11:6-9

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 65:17-25

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²²They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD— and their descendants as well. ²⁴Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

DISCUSSION:

Are these passages from Isaiah only about a different time, when there shall be a “new Heaven and a new Earth” – or are they goals toward which we are to strive in the present time?

Matthew 5:1-16,43-48

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. Are these words of Jesus an impossible ethic?***
- 2. How can Christians live by them today?***

PRAYER: O God, bring our nation and all nations to uphold justice and equity, that poverty, oppression, and violence may vanish and all may know peace and plenty; in the name of Jesus Christ, the ruler of all. Amen. [BCW, 694]

WAR AND PEACE THROUGH THE AGES SESSION II

In his own life, Jesus practiced what he preached. He healed the servant of a Roman soldier (Matt. 8:5–13). He rebuked Simon Peter when he cut off the ear of one of the soldiers who came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:47–56). He disappointed his own disciple, Judas Iscariot, who hoped for a military victory overthrowing Rome and who then betrayed Jesus, resulting in his death on the cross. Jesus' lifestyle witness was of forgiveness and healing, hospitality to strangers and enemies, and a willingness to die for what he believed rather than kill others to gain power. The example of his life of wrestling with the issues of how to deal with conflict, oppression, and the potential of war compels us to continue to struggle with these issues as his disciples in the twenty-first century.

The Very Early Church: The Apostle Paul and Others

The early church often lived as an endangered minority in the shadow of the Roman Empire. Questions about how to respond to the outside threat of an enemy continued for centuries. As the church moved further and further away from direct experience of Jesus, conflict also arose within the church and raised questions about how to deal with issues of difference in individual opinion as well as the threat of warring factions within its growing constituency.

The words of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the words of Jesus and his lifestyle example continued to be the starting point for these discussions. As these early Christians wrestled with whether to pay taxes to Caesar in the secular realm and how to deal with competition about spiritual gifts in the ecclesiastical one, they continued to struggle with issues of authority.

These questions were not just about specific behaviors. They were also and more deeply about identity and loyalty: “Who am I as a Christian and what does that require of me? To whom do I give my primary and ultimate allegiance?” These questions would be repeated over and over again in the conversations between church and culture and within the church when differing opinions arose.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. *Who am I as a Christian and what does that require of me?***
- 2. *To whom do I give my primary and ultimate allegiance?***

In the first twelve centuries of the Christian church, three positions emerged as significant responses to the question of what is a Christian response to war: pacifism, just war doctrine, and holy war (or crusade).

Pacifism is the total opposition to war. This opposition is not limited to the active participation in war. It extends to support for war even if not an active combatant. It opposes war, military intervention, or other violent methods as a means of dealing with and solving conflict. The early church fathers – the earliest leaders in the church – showed a strong commitment to pacifism in

their writings. One historian says, “The central traditions of the early church were uncompromisingly pacifist.”

It is important to recognize that not all the church fathers held this commitment. However, a significant group did make a personal profession of pacifism and included it in their guidance to the church as a whole. Cyrilian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria wrote from a pacifist perspective, often quoting words from Scripture as part of their witness.

These early pacifist commitments in the church have been the foundation of several other pacifist movements within the Christian church over the centuries. As part of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Mennonites claimed a pacifist position and formulated an initial understanding of conscientious objection to war. In the seventeenth century, the Religious Society of Quakers (Friends) also adopted pacifism as a core commitment. In the eighteenth century, the Church of the Brethren also established itself as pacifist. These three denominations are sometimes called the Historic Peace Churches because of their common commitment to pacifism in relation to war as well as their promotion of peace in the world.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. Is pacifism a viable option in a violent world?***
- 2. Is protection of the weak a Christian obligation?***
- 3. Is it right to depend on others to provide our defense while we do nothing?***

Just War Doctrine suggests that going to war, while not the preferred option, is necessary in certain cases. Just war doctrine is very clear that it is only under certain conditions, and when all of its criteria are met, that war that war is justified or acceptable as an option for responding in situations of conflict. Just war doctrine emerged in the fourth century after Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire (315 CE). Before this time, Christians were not required and may have been prohibited from serving in the Roman army. After Christianity was established as the state religion, service in the army was both open to Christians and could be required of Christians. The question of military service became acute when the Roman Empire was threatened by invasion from its northern neighbors. In response to the change in status for the church, to the vulnerability of the Roman Empire, and consequently to the questions of identity and loyalty it posed for Christians.

For a significant period of time, just war doctrine was applied to almost any war and became a disreputable way to deal with the complex issues of how a Christian may faithfully respond to events of war. More recently (for instance, World Wars I and II, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War), it has been revived as a way of evaluating responses to war.

Just War Criteria:

- War must be declared by a legitimate authority.
- War must be carried out with right intention.
- War must be the last resort.
- War must be waged on the position of proportionality.

- War must have a reasonable chance for success.
- War must be waged with all moderation possible.
- Special care must be taken to protect non-combatants and the innocent.

DISCUSSION:

1. *Can just war principles still be used in a world of nuclear weaponry?*
2. *How can they apply in today's situation of terrorist insurgency?*

Holy war is the concept that there are times when faithfulness to God requires one to go to war. War is then fought for God as part of, not in spite of, one's faith.

The Crusades are some of the clearest examples of holy war in the history of the Christian church. Early in the tenth century, when the Roman Catholic Church in France perceived that the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church was being threatened by a growing Muslim population, Pope Urban II proclaimed a holy war to protect these fellow Christians. The battle cry of the Crusades was "God wills it." Seven major crusades occurred from 1095 through 1244.

Holy war is no longer an official position of the Christian church in any of its mainline denominations. However, it is still an active position in the argument for particular wars in both explicit and implicit terms. God's will for war and God's blessing on war continue to find expression in theological circles and in public dialogue and debate.

DISCUSSION:

1. *In what ways do we use religion in time of war?*
2. *Are they legitimate from your standpoint? Why or why not?*

In the first half of the twentieth century, two world wars challenged Christians to continue their struggle with the question of how to respond to war. In both wars, Christians wrestled with their response to war as a method for addressing conflict and violence and to these two wars in particular. Responses varied. There was a wide range both among denominations and within denominations. It is fair to say that both pacifism and just war doctrine were considered, and both evoked a practice on the part of individuals. They were also part of the public discourse, especially in the period leading up to the beginnings of these wars.

In 1914, Christians from Europe gathered in Switzerland for an ecumenical council hoping to prevent the outbreak of war. World War I began before the council ended. Attendees had to return to their own countries. In December of that year, Christians gathered in Cambridge, England, and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation was founded. Today it is not only an ecumenical Christian witness for peace but also an interfaith organization building peace throughout the world.

During the 1930's in Germany, the Lutheran Church as well as other Christian churches did not resist Hitler's "final solution," and many served in the army that carried out his orders. In other places, resistance movements grew up from religious communities. Individual Christians in many countries practiced civil disobedience by hiding Jews and others vulnerable to the Nazi Holocaust. Some German pastors such as Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer agonized

over the issues of violence as an acceptable response to violence. Bonhoeffer eventually died because he was accused of being part of a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler.

At the end of WWII, the explosion of the atom bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought a new challenge to Christians considering how to respond to war. The atomic bomb changed the waging of war and its consequences. In the aftermath of the atom bomb and in the years of the Cold War that followed, the conversation about how a Christian responds to war brought a significant divide in churches that were not already committed to pacifism as a tenet of their religious belief and practice.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, this conversation led to the establishment of programs in many mainline denominations that wrestled with more than the question of the Christian response to war. The conversation broadened to include the responsibility of Christians to be actively engaged in the making and building of peace through the establishment of justice and the cultivation of alternatives to violence and military solutions. A second focus in the latter half of the twentieth century centered on how individual nations as well as the United Nations should respond when basic human rights were being violated in another country or region of the world. From this concern, criteria were developed for what has been called just peacemaking.

Just Peacemaking must:

- respond to a genuine need that cannot be met by other means,
- have a reasonable chance of alleviating the conditions it seeks to overcome,
- include humanitarian rescue,
- have international sponsorship to establish legitimacy,
- advance the general welfare of all inhabitants of the region,
- involve a minimal degree of coercion to achieve the purpose of the action, and
- be focused against those in authority rather than the broad population.

In 1998, the United Nations proclaimed the first decade of the twenty-first century to be a Decade for Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. Following the UN declaration, the World Council of Churches proclaimed 2001 to 2010 to be a Decade to Overcome Violence in the World. Since then, the National Council of Churches in the United States and a number of mainline denominations have established their own emphasis on ending violence and promoting nonviolence during this first decade of the twenty-first century. These efforts involve actively learning nonviolence as a practice in all aspects of life and working for justice in order to establish peace in local communities, the nation, and the world.

Then came the events of 9/11/2001, and the world's attention was directed elsewhere.

PRAYER:

Almighty God, you have made us and all things to serve you, now prepare the world for your rule. Come quickly to save us, so that wars and violence shall end, and your children may live in peace, honoring one another with justice and love.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. [Book of Common Worship (BCW), 175

WHAT SHOULD WE DO? SESSION III:

From the beginnings of recorded history, people have wondered about killing and war. As contemporary Christians, asking the question “Why?” is a beginning point for joining the conversation. Listening to and wresting with responses found in the biblical material and throughout the history and traditions of the church deepen our participation in the conversation. In the end, however, we must look at the context of our time and respond to the question of war in all its forms: from personal violence and interpersonal altercations to civic community conflict and finally to military actions around the world.

Individual and Institutional Responses

When we consider a Christian response to war, we must ask what is meant by “a Christian response.” Are we talking about the Christian church as a broad compendium of theological reflection, social teaching, and personal and corporate spiritual practice? Are we talking about specific actions of a particular branch of Christianity? Do we mean proclamations either by a body of Christians or a single person (such as the Pope) representing a large segment of the Christian church? Are we talking about responses of individual Christians throughout the many expressions of Christian tradition?

In practice, we cannot make clear distinctions. We must remember that there is a wide spectrum of Christian responses to war. We must know that though an elected body of a denomination or the head of a denomination may make a specific proclamation, it may not be adhered to in public discourse, policy, or practice by individuals who affiliate with that denomination. In Protestantism, we find a central principle that states that God alone is Lord of the conscience. This means that despite our corporate body’s statements on specific issues, individual members must also follow their conscience, which may not always agree with denominational policy.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. What is the role of denominational statements in the life of the church?*
- 2. If you disagree with a certain stance of your church, what should you do?*

How does an individual wrestle with the question of what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the twenty-first century and respond to the possibility and practice of war? There is no single response to the question. We may affirm that while there is ambiguity in the biblical witness concerning war as a solution to conflict, the ultimate vision of God is for peace. With that, we may also say that Jesus advocated peacemaking to his disciples, including the love of enemies, active challenge to systems of oppression and violence, and a kind of nonviolence that neither physically injured the opponent nor fled from the conflict itself. We may assert that the early church – those closest to the first-hand experience of Jesus’ teaching and practice – understood themselves to be pacifist and sought to practice the nonviolence that Jesus modeled for them.

Only later as Christianity came under the pressure of the surrounding culture did this practice change. Over the years, the predominant thinking became that war was not holy or “of God.” In the thinking of the broad body of the church, it was always to be a last resort if it were practiced

at all. In the twentieth century with the threat of the atomic bomb, the broad body of the church moved from an emphasis on how to respond to specific instances of war to a concern for building a culture of peace.

A significant response to the question of how a Christian responds to the potential for war in the twenty-first century is to become a peacemaker. This does not absolve us from having to wrestle with particular events of war, with the doctrine of just war, or with the strategy of just peacemaking. However, it does prepare us to shape our response from a deep base of ongoing peacemaking practice rather than an immediate reaction that may be influenced more by public or popular opinion than by our rooting in God and our faith commitment to follow Jesus Christ.

Becoming a Peaceful Person

The story of Cain and Abel has been repeated throughout history. Fear, jealousy, competition, and yearnings for security have spurred wars small and large, interpersonal and worldwide. Joan Chittister sums up the problem: “All war starts within our own hearts.” She offers an alternative: “Peace is the sign of the disarmed heart.” Responding to war involves acknowledging the wars that rage in our own hearts, disarming them through renewed relationship with God in prayer, and becoming peaceful people in our daily lives.

This is not a new thought. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus’ preaching and teaching from those Scriptures, the heart represented the deep place of human identity, the core identity of a human being. In both Hebrew and Christian Scripture, there is reference to the closed or hardened heart as a sign of spiritual sickness and separation from God and neighbor. The softened or open heart was considered receptive to God and responsive to neighbor. The heart was also seen as the place where repentance and renewal occurred (see Deut. 6:5; Ps. 51:10–12; Prov. 2:6–15; Jer. 24:1–7; Matt. 5: 8; Luke 6:43–45).

Attending to the formation of a spiritually healthy and open heart is the foundation for any Christian response in the world. The formation of a peaceful heart is a prerequisite to discerning a response to the practice of war in general and in specific. God’s deepest desire for us is peace. God’s gift to us is peace in our innermost beings. As Jesus pointed out, this peace may not look like the peace about which civic politicians or military personnel speak in the public arena (John 14:27a).

Peace is not an absence of conflict or of hostility. It is not a calm that is always without fear, neither is it a passive acquiescence in the face of injustice. The peace to which Jesus bore witness is a deep peace that comes from our intimate relationship with God. In this relationship with God, we come to know the unity of creation, the community of all humanity, and the wholeness that is already present in the ongoing creative mystery of God’s presence and activity in the world. From the experience of this peace, we are called to shape our daily lives, make our decisions about relationships locally and globally, with the person across the road and the person across the world.

Begin with Prayer

Prayer is at its deepest relationship with God. Prayer is a particular form we use to relate to God (written and spoken prayers, silent prayer, prayer as part of a worship liturgy in a community,

prayer as part of personal spiritual practice, and all the ways that Christians have learned to pray over the centuries – chanting, spiritual reading of Scripture and sacred texts, walking meditating, etc.). Prayer is also the relationship itself, our oneness with and in God. As a church billboard declared, “Prayer is the first resort.” Not the last.

Prayer is the place we begin to soften our hearts, to open them to God and neighbor, including our enemies and those who persecute us. It is where we look inward at our own fears, hurts, disappointments, hopes for meaning, and longings for security. It is the place we first confront our own violence and the potential in us for “war” to break out in words, deeds, attitudes, and actions. In prayer, we reveal our thoughts and behaviors to God. We make confession and acknowledge our brokenness and separation. We seek to mend our ways, heal our hearts, and pursue different paths and patterns in the future. There is transformative power in this prayer.

In prayer, we intercede for others. Our praying surrounds them with God’s love and peace when they may not be fully able to do so on their own. There is creative and healing power in this kind of prayer.

When confronted with a specific problem or decision, prayer offers a context in which to explore one’s feelings, understand one’s motives, and to assess one’s own strength to act in a particular way. When concerned about a situation of conflict, local or global, prayer is also a way to respond with hope and healing, even if being engaged first-hand in the situation is not possible. In either of these, prayer is a way we seek God’s peace and wisdom and join God’s peace and power as they are already present in any particular time and place.

DISCUSSION:

- 1. What is the place of prayer in your life?*
- 2. How does it make a difference for you?*

Reflecting on Scripture

Regular reading of Scripture, both Hebrew Scripture and Christian Scripture, provides a link to those in our long history who have wrestled with significant and complex questions about human life and relationship with God.

Take time to read and reflect on the specific texts related to issues of war and God’s vision of peace. Look at what the text said to the situation in which it was written and then ask what it may say to current situations in our world. How is the context the same? How does our context differ from the biblical situation of the text? Listen beyond the words of the text for God’s lively Word to speak in your own heart. How may this particular passage you are reading give you insight and wisdom into what is happening in your life and the world today? Be aware that the biblical material may not give a specific answer, but it may raise helpful questions to assist you in discovering the faithful response you need to make as a Christian in a contemporary context.

DISCUSSION:

What problems do you encounter when you try to apply Scripture to major questions like war and peace or issues of responsible citizenship?

Christian Community and Personal Discernment

There may be times when the question of how a Christian responds to war becomes a matter of making a specific decision about what to say or how to act. Personal discernment (or seeking God's wisdom for the decision) may be a helpful process in which to engage.

Discernment will involve personal prayer and study of Scripture focused specifically on the issue being faced, seeking the support of the Christian community as part of the discernment, prayer and Bible study in a group context, or sitting with a small group of people who are willing to listen to you and to help you listen to your own heart and for the voice of God. The Quakers call this a "clearness committee."

DISCUSSION:

In what ways does your church provide for group discernment?

A Peaceful Lifestyle and Public Witness

If war of any sort begins in our hearts, peace begins there as well. If we are working to form a peaceful heart, this transformation will soon be manifest in our family relationships and close friendships, in the way we encounter our colleagues at work and the person who bags our groceries. It will show up in the language we use, in our circle of friends and the way we treat those with whom we disagree, in the organizations we support and the places we actively engage in conversation about issues of war and peace in the world. Pursuing peace is a lifestyle option.

Sometimes, pursuing peace will require deep wrestling with ourselves and others about making a public witness to what we believe. Not all people who are genuinely committed to God's vision of peace will always agree on the best methods of achieving that peace. Even among peacemakers, conflict will continue. Learning to deal creatively with that conflict will be essential. Even people deeply committed to peace will wrestle with difficult decisions about how to pursue peace in complex situations. Learning to respect one another, to forgive one another, and to respect and forgive ourselves when we are not all we hope to be are all postures that are evidence of a peaceful heart.

To disarm our hearts is to address the memory and marks of Cain that remain with us as part of our human history. To nurture the peaceful heart is to root ourselves in relationship with God and neighbor and learn to dwell in the community of God's creation as healthy human beings. To pursue peace in the world is to be willing to struggle with the complex issues of our time from this foundation in God. This is a fundamental Christian response to war.

PRAYER:

O God, you love justice and you establish peace on earth.

We bring before you the disunity of today's world: the absurd violence, and the many wars which are breaking the courage of the peoples of the world; militarism and the armaments race, which are threatening life on the planet; human greed and injustice, which breed hatred and strife.

Send your Spirit and renew the face of the earth. Teach us to be compassionate toward the whole human family; strengthen the will of all those who fight for justice and for peace; lead all nations into the path of peace, and give us that peace which the world cannot give. Amen. [A Prayer from Zaire, BCW, 797-98]