

THE CHURCH'S WITNESS TO PEACE

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Abstrak: Tulisan ini berpangkal pada kenyataan sekarang yang ditandai dengan banyak kekerasan. Apakah yang harus dilakukan oleh Gereja-gereja? Bagaimana Gereja hidup lebih setia kepada apa yang dimaklumkan, bahwa yang menentukan hidup komunitas-komunitas dan pribadi-pribadi dalam Gereja adalah Yesus dari Nasaret, Anak Allah yang hidup, Pangeran perdamaian? Jalan yang ditempuh Yesus adalah jalan cinta kasih tanpa kekerasan untuk mematahkan spiral kekerasan dan pembalasan. Jalan ini dipilih Yesus, meski jalan ini menuju penderitaan dan kematian. Yesus juga mengajak para murid-Nya untuk menempuh jalan yang sama. Langkah pertama yang harus kita lakukan adalah menegaskan komitmen untuk tidak lagi membenarkan dan ikut serta dalam membunuh saudara-i Kristen lain dan saudara-saudari yang beriman lain.

Kata-kata kunci: perdamaian, kesaksian Gereja, Yesus dari Nasaret, Injil, kasih tanpa kekerasan.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; (Ephesians 2:14-18; NRSV).

Focus statement and Summary:

The Christian Church's witness to Peace has not always been congruent with the witness and life of its Lord - the One who was proclaimed as the Prince of Peace. It is urgent that the vocation of the Church be re-designed Into greater alignment with its Lord.

We stand at the end of the most violent and inhumane century known in the history of humankind. That fact itself calls the church to new imagination and courage to forge new paths for peace. The old strategies for peace have not delivered what has been so deeply desired and so fervently promised. We cannot expect different results by continuing to do the same thing.

The Jesus-way was to choose non-violent love in order to break the spiral of violence, revenge, and retaliation. He chose this way even though it would lead to rebuke, suffering, and death. Not only did Jesus live this way, he taught his disciples (and the communities they were to forge) to do so as well. What *is* hotly contested in ecumenical circles is the

normative authority that his choices need to exercise over our own personal and ecclesial choices now. This non-consensus, indeed, is part of our discussion today.

We can take a small step: make a firm commitment to stop justifying and participating in the killing of other Christians and people of other faiths. It is not the last step, but it is an important – though small – beginning.

Where do we stand?

Our task is to reflect on our Church's responsibility as a witness to the peace of Jesus Christ in a torn and violent world. What platform are we standing on as we share this witness to peace? What is the Holy Spirit nudging us toward as we struggle to be faithful to its divine presence within and among us?

We stand on the cusp of the 21st century. We stand in our differing contexts: Canada, Indonesia, North America, Asia. We stand within the Christian Church. We stand within our own broken, sinful, human condition. We stand in a world that does not function as it

should. We stand within the conviction that all people are created by the same God, a conviction that inextricably ties us all together in human solidarity.

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We stand in a world that desperately cries out for peace with justice. We stand in a spiritually alive world that is looking for a word of hope and a new paradigm for peace from those who proclaim that the Prince of Peace has come, is among us, and is our Lord.

We stand in a world of religious passion; passion that is frequently used to justify the violent and inhumane ways we relate to each other and those around us. We stand within Christian ecclesial and other religious traditions that continue to justify violence and killing when it is 'justifiable.' Our religious traditions continue to advocate for, participate in, and bless peace-making strategies that are committed to the successful use of violence.

We stand in a new century crying out for new and serious paradigms for peace-building, and that understandably looks to the Christian church as a fountain and source for guidance, inspiration, and hope in this quest for a peaceful and just world.

Ultimately, we all stand in the need of confession. The rich and profound nature of biblical *shalom* has, unfortunately, not always been our paradigm for action and ministry. We have each, in our own way, reduced *shalom* to manageable preferences. Wealth, power, individualism, comfort, and an aversion to suffering have all contributed to our reluctance to fully embrace the *shalom* of God for ourselves and for the world. Part

of the confession of this presentation is that here too our focus will be narrow, namely we will focus primarily on overt violence, recognizing that it is but one dimension of the lack of *shalom* in our Christian witness.

What are the questions?

When we ponder the most appropriate role and contribution of the Christian church in our quest for global peace, many questions emerge. What does it mean to be a people of God committed to *shalom* in all its dimensions? Is there a distinctive message that Christian churches have when we think about how best to nurture and act upon biblical *shalom* within and beyond our church communities? What difference does it make that we proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth (and not Joshua, son of Nun) is the Lord of our ecclesial vision and our personal ethics? How can we encourage and participate in a peace-web that nurtures a culture of peace regardless of its inspirational source? Is there a distinctive focus that churches from our countries might wish to suggest to the larger world communion of churches and to the civil societies of which we are a part? What are some new things we need to consider for peace in such a time as this, and what are the old things that we need to discard?

There are also questions related to the historic and actual role of Christians and churches in addressing issues of peace and conflict in our world. The spectrum of how Christians, and our hermeneutical traditions, have justified and blessed Christian participation in violent methods with the hope of generating peace is well known. The spectrum includes holy war, preventive strikes, offensive combat, peace-making, peace-keeping, self-defense, the responsibility to protect, and capital punishment (among others). There are two common threads that run through this spectrum. One is the implicit confidence that criteria to limit the use of violence can be established and will be followed in order to enhance security and nurture a peaceful world. The second

common thread is the assumption that biblical hermeneutics ultimately lend themselves to justify violent responses as being biblically faithful responses that reflect the will of God. Such responses are thereby considered justifiable as expressions of the Lordship of Jesus in our personal and ecclesial lives.

The rationale that justifies Christian participation in and support of violence and war as justifiable mechanisms to achieve peace has deep historical, philosophical, and theological roots. We can think of this as a “yes..... but....” paradigm. Its instinctive hermeneutical/ethical assumption is: yes - violence can be justified, ... but - criteria need to be established for its justifiable use.

What is the primary question?

What is it exactly that we *can* talk about together when it comes to sharing perspectives on peace and non-violence? In addressing an issue as large as the Christian witness to peace, in a group as diverse as those present here today, it is critically important that we identify as clearly as possible *the* primary question that makes sense to pursue. And we should not underestimate the difficulty of doing so. The primary question will need to come from the core of our identity, not from the margins. It will need to challenge as well as inspire us. It will need to emerge from shared convictions and not disparate ones. We will need to proceed in a spirit of confession. And we will need to generate the courage to trust in new possibilities that are becoming increasingly compelling.

I would suggest that there indeed is such a question, and that we do need to pursue it. We often say that there *is* one thing that allows the Christian ecumenical table to function. It is our common and passionate commitment to the triune God, and within that commitment, our belief that the risen Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord of our ecclesial life, our communal presence in the public square, and the personal ethic of each transformed person who has

committed to Jesus’ Lordship in his/her life. And so I believe that the primary question that can (and should) serve as *the* question for us is:

How can we more faithfully live out our proclamation that the Lord of our ecclesial communities and our personal lives is Jesus of Nazareth, the risen Son of God, the Prince of Peace?

We need to explore the value that the Christian *gospel* (as defined by the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus) adds to the *torah* and the *wisdom* traditions available to us before the coming of Jesus. That is, what difference does it make that our common Christian scriptures personify Jesus as *torah* and *wisdom* incarnate, and that personal and ecclesial faithfulness to God’s reign now need to be understood via this Jesus-grid?

I suggest that this question responds to the criteria for adequacy indicated above:

- a. It comes from the core of our identity, not from the margins.
- b. It challenges and inspires us.
- c. It emerges from shared convictions and not disparate ones.
- d. It challenges us all to a spirit of confession.
- e. It compels us to generate the courage to trust in new possibilities that became compelling as Jesus re-interpreted and lived out his hermeneutics of *torah* and *wisdom*.

What are the starting points?

The topic “The Church’s Witness to Peace” points to a very broad agenda. Christian experience and biblical

hermeneutics have sensed inherent tensions in our attempts to understand that the incarnation of *torah* and *wisdom* in Jesus is *gospel*. These tensions have led to numerous responses.

1. One response has been to separate this *gospel* into dispensational time-zones in which the *ideal* for peace proclaimed by Jesus is understood to be for all and for all-time, but in which the *strategies* for peace employed by Jesus (i.e., loving the enemy, non-violence, and the inevitability of suffering) are defined by time-zones. This focus suggests that while such strategies may be authoritative in some future time-zone, they are not normative now.

2. Another response has been that we continue to live in two kingdoms: the one inaugurated (but not yet consummated) by Jesus; the other, the kingdom of “this world” and the anti-godly principalities and values represented within it. This response has pointed to two possibilities. One is that while we understand *how* we would need to live in the unconsummated kingdom of Jesus, there are moments when we don’t *need* to. That is, there are times when we must submit to the lesser strategies of the worldly kingdoms, e.g., violence, in order to live within them. The other possibility is that we attempt to insulate ourselves from the worldly kingdom by trying to withdraw from it.

3. Another hermeneutical response has been to posit a gulf between the *gospel* as lived and taught by Jesus, and the teachings of other inspired authors of the New Testament, such as Paul and Peter. This hermeneutic has suggested that we must allow the authorities

of the pagan world to define the personal and communal ethics of the Christian community, even when they call the Christian church to non-*gospel* activity. Hermeneutical appeals to Romans 13 abound in this effort to demonstrate why the non-violent *gospel* of Jesus must be modified in order to fulfill our responsibilities as citizens.

4. Yet another response has been one of lament. While the vision and the strategies/ethics toward peace, as lived and taught by a carpenter from Nazareth, are admirable in the rural simplicity of his time, they simply are not adequate, and therefore not applicable in dealing with the wild complexities of our century. Ultimately, this means that while the comprehensive *gospel* of peace is *nice*, it is not particularly *relevant* to our lives.

What is the primary starting point?

The understanding that Jesus lived a non-violent personal ethic and advocated the same for his followers is virtually uncontested within hermeneutically serious ecumenical (and even inter-faith) circles. Pope Benedict XVI – just as one example - in his recent address to a delegation from our church (Mennonite), and referencing the joint Mennonite/Catholic statement “Called Together to be Peacemakers,” stated:

We both emphasize that our work for peace is rooted in Jesus Christ "who is our peace, who has made us both one making peace that he might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross (Eph 2:14-16)" (Report No. 174). We both understand that "reconciliation,

*nonviolence, and active
peacemaking belong to
the heart of the Gospel
(cf. Mt 5:9; Rom
12:14-21; Eph 6:15)"
(Libreria Editrice
Vaticana; Oct./07;
italics added).*

The Jesus-way was to choose non-violent love in order to break the spiral of violence, revenge, and retaliation. He chose this way even though it would lead to rebuke, suffering, and death. Not only did Jesus live this way, he taught his disciples (and the communities they were to forge) to do so as well. What *is* hotly contested in ecumenical circles is the normative authority that his choices need to exercise over our own personal and ecclesial choices now. This non-consensus, indeed, is an ongoing reality among us today.

Jesus' hermeneutical preference and resulting ethic were not marginal to, optional for, or superficial choices within the *gospel*. They were and are right at the heart and essence of the *gospel*. They were profound ways of defining power and his relationship to power. The cross, the central - and ecumenically common - symbol of salvation, is the clearest evidence we have how serious Jesus was about the non-violent nature of the kingdom-paradigm that was to be normative for him and was meant to be such for his followers. Too often the cross is understood as weakness in the face of power rather than the ultimate symbol of divine strength in the face of human weakness.

Paul articulates a key ethical implication of following Jesus in the way of the cross. He states:

*Our struggle is not
against enemies of
blood and flesh, but
against the rulers,
against the authorities,
against the cosmic
powers of this present*

*darkness, against the
spiritual forces of evil in
the heavenly places
(Eph. 6:12; NRSV).*

What he is saying is what Jesus also believed, namely that we should not consider our enemies to be "people," i.e., blood and flesh. Rather our enemies are those powerful forces that nurture and shape the imaginations of people, and that provide the conceptual foundations that encourage, nourish, justify, and free people to choose evil and sinful ways. Unless we can engage these forces controlling our imaginations, we will not encounter the enemy.

Thus, I believe that the primary starting point for us is to focus on the meaning and relevance of the non-violent strategy of Jesus, and the resulting suffering, as indispensable companions to his vision for peace.

We need to renew our commitment to the very real possibility that suffering may be a necessary salvific component to what makes peace possible. We regularly celebrate such saving sacrifice in our sacraments and ordinances. We must find new ways of moving our commitment to non-violent suffering from liturgical sacrament/observance/celebration to personal and ecclesial ethics.

Neither of these starting points - namely our confidence in non-violent strategies for the sake of peace, nor our willingness to suffer for the integrity of the gospel of peace - have been or are front-burner commitments for the church today. We need to grapple seriously with these as primary starting points if we want to be true to the way that Jesus incarnates *torah* and *wisdom* in order to become *gospel* for us. It may be too much to ask that we adjust our 'yes... but..' instincts to a 'nonever..' paradigm, but we do need to consider the possibility of moving toward a middle axiom, namely a "no ...but..." instinct. This would mean that we allow ourselves to contemplate a 'no... but...' response only after overcoming our

powerful gospel instincts of 'no... never...'

A call to respond

We are inaugurating a new century. We are determined to be churches that are committed to our faith and eager to live our lives as the Body of the Christ who is the Prince of Peace, the Lord of our imaginations and our activities. Allow me to suggest some important initiatives that could come from us:

1. We need to spend more time together discerning how peace might look in the 'Ecclesial Sphere.' Without this, our witness to faith in the public sphere will inevitably uncover the inconsistencies among us and will not reflect the integrity we seek. How can we more fully live our proclamation of peace? How can our ecclesial lives demonstrate more abundantly the sacrament of non-violent love for each other, our neighbor, and our enemy? How can our ecclesial purposes be more profusely committed to be communities of the Prince of Peace? These are important themes for discussion at the ecumenical table where our individual identities impact the integrity of our common witness.
2. I am aware of the important nature of the questions that lie behind our desire to be faithful peace-makers. These questions often have to do with the stance of the church in the thorny, political, national, and international situations crying out for urgent responses. It is my sense, however, that spending time on internal conversations is not a waste of time, nor is it avoiding the other issues, nor is it substituting our broader agenda with a narrower focus. It is, rather, a critically important way of responding to the need for peace

with an integral gospel for peace in which what we desire and proclaim is already a reflection of how we live with each other. Biblically speaking, I am suggesting that we must not too easily leap over Matthew 18 in order to rush to Romans 13, i.e., our witness to Christ's rule among the nations must have its foundation in the rule of Christ within the church.

3. Matthew 18 focuses our attention on the importance of our internal ecclesial processes for integral witness to the gospel. Yet, it is apparent that much war, violence, and killing have been and continue to be perpetrated by Christians dealing with other Christians. This is true not only in the most overt examples such as Northern Ireland and England. It is also true in the massive killing machines of the Second World War (55 million killed; 31 million of which were in Christian Russia, Poland, and Germany). It was true in the Civil War of the USA as well as their war of Independence. It was true in the 16th century when Catholics, Reformed and Lutheran churches hunted down Anabaptists and Mennonites, and then tortured, beheaded, and burnt them at the stake. More recently Kosovo was bombed by largely Catholic and Protestant nations, while Russia defended the Serbs. During the Korean War, western Christian forces virtually obliterated Pyongyang, now capital of North Korea, a city having a high percentage of Christians due to western Protestant missionary activity. About 90% of the population of Rwanda identifies itself as Christian, and the numbers are higher in most Latin American

countries. It is entirely common for revolution, genocide, massacre, and mass murder to be committed by Christians against Christians. There is indeed much to do in the Ecclesial Sphere as we continue to contemplate our witness to the world.

4. If “*nonviolence belongs to the heart of the gospel*,” as Mennonites and Catholics (and many others) have come to agree, it is time that we make some fundamental commitments to each other within the ‘Ecclesial Sphere.’ Indeed, it is indefensible not to do so. We need to face the fact that in the 20th century (and before) much of the violence, war, and killing was perpetrated between and among Christians. And this needs to change. Christians, in the name of Christ, must commit to stop killing other Christians in the name of civic responsibility, national security, and biblical hermeneutics. Specifically, Baptists must commit to stop killing other Baptists even when other authorities insist that they do so. Anglicans must commit not only to stop killing Anglicans but also to stop killing Baptists. We all need to commit to stop killing Catholics and Catholics need to commit to stop killing Pentecostals. In our own tradition (Mennonite), the spirit of the violent revolutionary wing of the Anabaptists, the 16th century Münsterites, and more recently the spirit of the reactionary Mennonite *selbstschutz* groups in the Bolshevik revolution of the 1920s, must not become the assumed norms for strategic initiative or defense for Christian living in a violent world. Furthermore, Mennonites need to stop choosing which killings they

prefer to ignore in the name of their own self-interest. For all of us, it is time to move beyond those things that allow us to justify such activity within the Ecclesial Sphere so that our witness beyond the Ecclesial Sphere can enjoy the integrity it is meant to have. Such commitment is not simply a strategic move for potential peace in the world, although it may well be the most effective thing toward that end that we have ever done. It is, more importantly, a move toward fuller obedience to the presence of the Holy Paraclete promised by Jesus and the gospel of the Prince of Peace whom we identify as the Lord of our ecclesial and ecumenical lives. And ever fuller obedience to Jesus, the Prince of Peace, must be seen by all Christians as a self-evident good.

5. We need to commit to a hermeneutic of the *gospel* of Jesus that is literally non-lethal. We need to promise each other that our biblical hermeneutics will not move us toward justifying us killing each other, not within nor beyond our own nation-state. Hermeneutical suspicion must restrain the justification of violence. We need to promise each other that we will exercise hermeneutical self-control when we feel the urge to justify our participation in such violent activities against each other. It is time for Christians to commit to stop killing fellow Christians. And it is time for Christians to stop training themselves and their young people to kill each other. And it is time to stop blessing the weapons, the technology, the people, and the logic that are used for killing. And it is time for Christians to stop paying in order

to train each other to kill each other. It is time to stop using our sacred texts and traditions to justify initiating and participating in such actions. We need to stop some things within the Ecclesial Sphere so that our witness in the world may have the integrity we seek. At the very least, we need to move from our habitual yes – but - thinking to a no – but - potential. And we need to do so with the integrity suggested by the *gospel* of peace. The time is now. We are here for such a time as this.

6. And in the name of obedience to the Prince of Peace, we dare not stop here. We are fully aware that we live in an intentional inter-faith context in which dialogue and cooperation are very important. We need to offer these same commitments to those with whom we cooperate and propose to talk. Our integrity in dialogue will be measured by our capacity to also promise our partners that our gospel is non-lethal for them too. If we sit across the table from those of other faiths, saying that we want to cooperate with them and get to know them better, yet ultimately we are still willing to participate in killing them and those within their houses of faith, our dialogue does not have the integrity that the *gospel* of Jesus Christ demands. We must be willing to shed the image of previous strategies for inter-faith interactions (e.g., the crusades and the conquest of the Americas). We cannot afford to enter processes of conversation/cooperation/evangelism unless we can unequivocally denounce and leave behind the violent strategies that have been part of our efforts up to this point. We must be able to assure the Islam Imam, the Jewish Rabbi, the

Buddhist priest, the Native Canadian elder, and the Hindu guru that they and their people are safe in our company. What, after all, can inter-faith dialogue and evangelism be without this foundational promise? Would we not prefer to have the same commitment from them?

Conclusion:

I am fully aware that this presentation does not address everything. It does not address the full agenda that biblical *shalom* challenges us to. Neither does it address the immediate and urgent needs crying for attention. For example, it does not provide specific counsel for difficult and complex domestic and international questions (Rwanda, Darfur). I do not want to suggest that those are not important. My concern is that in order to more effectively address these urgent concerns in a new way, we need to get out of our habits in which we instinctively default to the millennia-old arguments that justify the use of violence in order to establish the peace we seek, i.e., the yes – but assumptions. It is possible and necessary to develop an instinct that has a different starting point. I am confident that if we do, the Holy Spirit working among us and the fruit of this work, while unpredictable, would be very positive and even amazing.

I would venture to suggest that some results would indeed be predictable:

1. Such commitments to each other would generate enormous public interest, and provide mountains of opportunities for positive public witness in the media and around the world.
2. Such commitments would force us to answer many questions that we are not now, but should be, asking. This would be healthy.
3. Such a public witness would attract many people, especially the disenchanted, back to the gospel and to the church.

4. Such a process would invigorate the church's commitment to biblical faithfulness, and reconstruct a part of the public Christian platform that now remains largely un-constructed.
5. Such a process would speak into issues of national and international political priorities, but from a vantage point seldom taken seriously now.

The Christian church is in a unique and historic space to speak about the gospel from its foundational, but largely forgotten, perspective. Christ is our peace, for such a time as this.

Daftar Pustaka

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