

*Ron Sider at the 1984 Mennonite World Conference in Strasburg, France*

## ***Do we have the courage?***

[Ron begins his talk with a story about his evangelism with, and the conversion of, a South African activist. He then says:]

*I tell you this story to remind us that as we deepen our involvement in questions of peace and justice we must increase also our activity in the area of evangelism. The first Anabaptists after all were the most active evangelists of the sixteenth century. May we never lose their passion for inviting everyone to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. (Applause) If our churches lose their zeal for evangelism we will stagnate and die. (Applause)*

### ***God's people reconciling.***

Over our past 450 years of martyrdom, migration and missionary proclamation, the God of shalom has been preparing us Anabaptists for a late twentieth-century rendezvous with history. The next twenty years will be the most dangerous -- and probably the most vicious and violent -- in human history. If we are ready to embrace the cross, God's reconciling people might save millions of lives and profoundly impact the course of history.

Violent economic structures annually maim and murder the poor by the millions. Idolatrous nationalism, religious bigotry, racial prejudice, and economic selfishness turn people against people in terrifying orgies of violence in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Southern Africa, and Latin America. The competing self-righteous ideologies of the United States and the Soviet Union trample arrogantly on the people's dreams for justice and freedom in Central America and Afghanistan, in the Philippines and Poland. Always, behind every regional conflict which kills thousands or millions, lurks the growing threat of a nuclear exchange between the superpowers which would kill hundreds of millions. We teeter on the brink of nuclear disaster.

Over our 450 years of commitment to Jesus' love for enemies finds its kairos - it's special hour of decision and fulfillment - in these two terrifying decades. This could be our finest hour. Never has the world needed our message more. Never has it been more open. Now is the time to risk everything for our belief that Jesus is the only way to peace. If we still believe it, now is the time to live it.

To rise to this challenge of our Lord and of history, we need to do three things: we need first to reject the ways that we have misunderstood or weakened Jesus' call to be peacemakers; second we need to embrace the full biblical understanding of shalom; and third we need to prepare to die by the thousands.

### **Jesus' Call To Be Peacemakers**

First, the misunderstandings. Too often we have fallen into an isolationist nonresistance which silently ignores or gladly profits from injustice and war as long as our boys don't have to fight. As long as conscientious objector status protects our purity and safety our neighbors need not fear that we will raise troubling questions about the injustice their armies reinforce or the civilians they maim and kill. The most famous advocate of pacifism in our time, Mahatma Gandhi, once said that if the only two choices are to kill or to stand quietly by doing nothing while the weak are oppressed and killed, then, of course, we must kill. I agree.

But there is always a third option. We can always prayerfully and nonviolently place ourselves between the weak and the violent, between the oppressed and the oppressor. Do we have the courage to move from the back lines of isolationist nonresistance to the front lines of nonviolent peacemaking?

Sometimes we justify our silence with the notion that pacifism is a special vocation for us peculiar Anabaptists. It is not for other Christians. But this approach will not work, in fact it is probably the last stop before total abandonment of our historic peace witness. If pacifism is not God's will for all Christians, then it is not God's will for any.

On the other hand, if the one who taught us to love our enemies is the eternal Son - who became flesh in the carpenter who died and rose and now reigns as Lord of the universe, - then the peaceful way of nonviolence is for all who believe and obey him. Do we have the courage to summon the entire Church to forsake the way of violence?

Sometimes we weaken and confuse our peace witness with an Anabaptist version of Martin Luther's "two kingdom" doctrine. Luther said that in the spiritual kingdom God rules by love, therefore in our private lives as Christians we dare never act violently. But in the secular kingdom God rules by the sword, therefore the same person in the role of executioner or soldier rightly kills.

I was talking recently with one of our Anabaptist church leaders for whom I have the deepest love and respect. He said that he was a pacifist, he said that it would be wrong for him to go to war; but he quickly added that the government is supposed to have armies. The United States he said had unfortunately fallen behind the Soviet Union and therefore President Reagan's nuclear build-up was necessary and correct. I fear that many Western Mennonites and Brethren in Christ have endorsed the current arms race at the ballot box.

If we want wars to be fought, then we ought to have the moral integrity to fight them ourselves. (Applause) To vote for other people's sons and daughters to march off to death while ours safely register as conscientious objectors is a tragic form of confused hypocrisy. (Applause)

If, on the other hand, we believe that Jesus' nonviolent cross is the way to peace then we need to implore everyone to stop seeking security in ever more lethal weapons. Jesus wept over Jerusalem's coming destruction because it did not recognize his way of peace. Do we have the courage with love and tears to warn the governments of the world that the ever upward spiral of violence will lead finally to annihilation?

Finally, the affluent are regularly tempted to separate peace from justice. Affluent Anabaptists, in North America and Western Europe, can do that by focusing all of our energies on saving our own skins from nuclear holocaust and neglecting the fact that injustice now kills millions every year. We can also do it by denouncing revolutionary violence without also condemning and correcting the injustice that causes that violence. In Central America today fifty percent of the children die before the age of five because of starvation malnutrition, and related diseases. At the same time vast acres of the best land in Central America grow export crops for North Americans and Western Europeans. Unjust economic structures today murder millions of poor folk.

Our call to reject violence, whether it comes from affluent churches in industrialized countries or middle-class congregations in Third World nations, will have integrity only if we are willing to engage in costly action to correct injustice. Thank God for the courageous youth that our mission boards and Mennonite Central Committee have sent to stand with the poor. Thank God for the costly courage of poor Mennonite congregations in Central America and persecuted Mennonite churches in Ethiopia and elsewhere. But that is only a fraction of what we could have done. The majority of our people continue to slip slowly into numbing, unconcerned affluence.

Do we have the courage as a united people in our congregations to show the poor of the earth that our peace witness is not a subtle support for an unjust status quo, but rather a commitment to risk danger and death so that justice and peace may embrace?

**Embrace The Biblical Vision Of Shalom**

Acknowledging these past temptations and misunderstandings is essential. But we need not, indeed we dare not remain mired in our failures. Instead we can allow the fullness of the biblical vision of peace, of shalom to transform us into a reconciling people ready to challenge the madness of the late twentieth century.

The richness of the biblical vision of peace is conveyed in the Hebrew word for peace "shalom". Shalom means right relationships in every direction -- with God, with neighbor, and with the earth.

Leviticus 26:3-6 describes the comprehensive shalom which God will give to those who walk in obedient relationship to God. The earth will yield rich harvests, wild animals will not ravage the countryside, and the sword will rest. Shalom means not only the absence of war but also a land flowing with milk and honey. It also includes just economic relationships with the neighbor. It means the fair division of land so that all families can earn their own way. It means the Jubilee and sabbatical release of debts so that great extremes of wealth and poverty do not develop among God's people. The result of such justice, Isaiah says, is peace (32:16-17). And the psalmist reminds us that God desires that "justice and peace will kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10). If we try to separate justice and peace, we tear asunder what God has joined together. Tragically, the people of Israel refused to walk in right relationship with God and neighbor. They ran after false gods, they oppressed the poor. So God destroyed them. But the prophets looked beyond the tragedy of national destruction to a time when God's Messiah, the Prince of Peace, would come to restore right relationships with God and neighbor. (e.g., Isaiah 9:2ff; 11:1ff). "And 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 anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).

Jesus Christ was the long-expected Messiah. And just as the prophets had promised, shalom was at the heart of his messianic work and message. But Jesus' approach to peacemaking was not to lapse into passive nonresistance; it was not to withdraw to isolated solitude; it was not to teach one ethic for the private sphere and another for public life. Jesus modeled an activist challenge to the status quo, summoning the entire Jewish people to accept his nonviolent messianic strategy instead of the Zealot's militaristic methods.

Jesus' approach was not one of passive nonresistance. If Jesus' call not to resist one who is evil in Matthew 5:39 was a summons to pure nonresistance, and the rejection of all forms of pressure and coercion, then Jesus regularly contradicted his own teaching. Jesus unleashed a blistering attack on the Pharisees, denouncing them as blind guides, fools, hypocrites, and snakes -- surely psychological coercion of a vigorous type as is even the most loving church discipline which Jesus prescribed (Matthew 18:15ff). Nor was Jesus nonresistant when he cleansed the temple. He engaged in aggressive resistance against evil when he marched into the temple, drove the animals out with a whip, dumped the money tables upside down, and denounced the money changers as robbers. If Matthew 5:39 means that all forms of resistance to evil are forbidden, then Jesus sinfully disobeyed his own command. Jesus certainly did not kill the money changers, I doubt that he used the whip on them, but he certainly resisted their evil in a dramatic act of civil disobedience.

Or consider Jesus' response when a soldier unjustly struck him on the cheek at his trial (John 18:19-24). Instead of turning the other cheek and meekly submitting to this injustice, he protested! "If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Apparently Jesus thought that protesting police brutality or engaging in civil disobedience in a nonviolent fashion was entirely consistent with his command not to resist the one who is evil.

Jesus would never have ended up on the cross if he had exemplified the isolationist pacifism of withdrawal that has so often tempted us Mennonites. Nor would he have offended anyone if he had simply conformed to current values as we are so often tempted to do when we abandon the pattern of isolation. Rejecting both isolation and accommodation, Jesus lived at the heart of his society challenging the status quo at every point that it was wrong.

For instance, Jesus upset men happy with the easy divorce laws that permitted them to dismiss their wives on almost any pretext. He defied the social patterns of his day that treated women as inferiors. Breaking social custom, Jesus appeared publicly with women, he taught them theology, he honored them with his first resurrection appearance. Jesus angered the political rulers of his time, who were smugly satisfied with

domination of their subjects by his call for servant leadership. And he terrified the economic establishment, summoning materialists like the rich young ruler to give away their wealth, denouncing those who oppressed widows, and calling the rich to loan to the poor even if they had no hope of repayment (Luke 6:30ff). Indeed, he considered concern for the poor so important that he warned that those who do not feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, will go to hell.

Jesus disturbed the status quo - but not for mere love of change. It was his commitment to shalom, to the right relationships promised in messianic prophecy, that make him a disturber of an unjust peace. He brought right relationships between men and women, between rich and poor, by his radical challenge to the status quo. Repeatedly in our history the terror of persecution and the temptation of security have lured us to retreat to the safety of isolated rural solitude where our radical ideas threaten no one. But that was not Jesus' way. He challenged his society so vigorously and so forcefully that the authorities had only two choices. They had to accept his call to repentance and change or they had to get rid of him. Do we have the courage to follow in his steps?

Jesus approach was activist and it was vigorous, but it was not violent. A costly self-giving love even for enemies was central to his message. He called his followers to abandon retaliation, even the accepted eye for an eye of Mosaic legal system. He said that his followers would persist in costly love even for enemies, even if those enemies never reciprocated.

It is hardly surprising that Christians have been tempted to weaken Jesus' call to costly self-sacrifice whether by postponing its application to the millennium, labeling it an impossible ideal, or restricting its relevance to some personal/private sphere. The last is perhaps the most widespread and the most tempting. Does Jesus merely mean that although the individual Christian in his personal role should respond nonviolently to enemies, that same person as public official should kill?

In his historical context Jesus came as the Messiah of Israel with a plan and an ethic for the entire Jewish people. He advocated love toward political enemies as his specific political response to centuries of violence. His radical nonviolence was a conscious alternative to the contemporary Zealots call for violent revolution to usher in the Messianic kingdom.

There is no hint that Jesus' reason for reacting to the Zealots was that they were unauthorized individuals whose violent sword would have been legitimate if only the Sanhedrin had given the order. On the contrary his point was that the Zealots whole approach to enemies, even oppressive imperialists was fundamentally wrong. The Zealots offered one approach, Jesus offered another, but both directed their message to the entire Jewish people.

The many premonitions of national disaster in the Gospels indicate that Jesus realized that the only way to avoid destruction and attain messianic shalom was through a forthright rejection of the Zealots' call to arms. In fact, Luke places the moving passage about Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem immediately after the triumphal entry -- just after Jesus had disappointed popular hopes with his insistence on a peaceful messianic strategy. "And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!'" (Luke 19:4ff).

Zealot violence, Jesus knew, would lead to national destruction. It was an illusion to look for peace through violence. The way of the suffering servant was the only way to Messianic Shalom. Jesus' invitation to the entire Jewish people was to believe that the Messianic kingdom was already breaking into the present. Therefore, if they would accept God's forgiveness and follow his Messiah, they could begin now to live according to the peaceful values of the Messianic age. Understood in this historical setting, Jesus' call to love enemies can hardly be limited to the personal sphere of private life.

Furthermore, the personal-public distinction also seems to go against the most natural, literal meaning of the text. There is no hint whatsoever in the text of such a distinction. In fact, Jesus' words are full of references to public life. "Resist not evil" applies, Jesus says, when people take you to court (Matthew 5:40) and when foreign rulers legally demand forced labor (v. 41). Indeed, the basic norm Jesus transcends (an eye for an eye) was a fundamental principle of the Mosaic legal system. We can safely assume that

members of the Sanhedrin and other officials heard Jesus words. The most natural conclusion is that Jesus intended his words to be normative not just in private but also in public life.

We have examined the horizontal shalom with the neighbor which Jesus brought. But Jesus also announced and accomplished a new peace with God. Constantly he proclaimed God's astonishing forgiveness to all who repent. And then he obeyed the Father's command to die as the atonement for God's sinful enemies.

God's attitude toward sinful enemies revealed at the cross is the foundation of biblical nonviolence. Let us never ground our pacifism in sentimental imitation of the gentle Nazarene or in romantic notions of heroic martyrdom. Our commitment to nonviolence is rooted in the heart of historic Christian orthodoxy. It is grounded in the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, and in his substitutionary atonement at the cross.

Jesus said that God's way of dealing with enemies was to persist in loving them. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Why? "So that you may be sons and daughters of your Creator in heaven." In fact, Jesus went even further. Jesus said that God's way of dealing with enemies was to take their evil upon himself. The crucified criminal hanging limp on the middle cross is the eternal Word who in the beginning was with God and indeed was God, but for our sake became flesh and dwelt among us. Only when we grasp that that is who the crucified one was, do we begin to fathom the depth of Jesus' teaching that God's way of dealing with enemies is the way of suffering love. By powerful parable and by dramatic demonstration, Jesus had taught that God forgives sinners again and again. Then he died on the cross to accomplish that reconciliation.

The cross is the most powerful statement about God's way of dealing with enemies. Jesus made it very clear that he intended to die and that he understood that death as a ransom for others.

That the cross is the ultimate demonstration that God deals with enemies through suffering love receives its clearest theological expression in St. Paul. Listen to Romans 5:8-10: "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us... While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son."

Jesus' vicarious death for sinners is the foundation of, and the deepest expression of, Jesus' command for us to love our enemies. We are enemies of God in a double sense. For one thing because sinful persons are hostile to God, and for another because the just, holy Creator cannot tolerate sin. For those who know the law, failure to obey it results in a divine curse. But Christ redeemed us from that curse by becoming a curse for us. Jesus' blood on the cross was an expiation for us sinful enemies of God. He who knew no sin was made sin for you and me.

Jesus' vicarious death for sinful enemies of God is the foundation of our Anabaptist commitment to nonviolence. The incarnate one knew that God was loving and merciful even toward sinful enemies. That's why he associated with sinners, forgave their sins, and completed his mission by dying for them on the cross. And it was precisely the same understanding of God that prompted him to command his followers to love their enemies. We as God's children are to imitate the loving characteristics of our heavenly God who rains mercifully on the just and the unjust. That's why we should love our enemies. The vicarious cross of Christ is the fullest expression of the character of God. At the cross God suffered for sinners in the person of the incarnate Son.

We will never understand all the mystery there. But it's precisely because the one hanging limp on the middle cross was the word who became flesh that we know two interrelated things. First, that a just God mercifully accepts us sinful enemies just as we are. And second, that God wants us to go and treat our enemies exactly the same way.

What a fantastic fulfillment of the messianic promise of shalom. Jesus did bring right relationships - both with God and with neighbor. In fact, he created a new community of shalom, a reconciled and reconciling people. As Ephesians 2 shows, peace with God through the cross demolishes hostile divisions among all those who stand together under God's unmerited forgiveness. Women and slaves became persons. Jews accepted Gentiles. Rich and poor shared their economic abundance. So visibly different was this new

community of shalom that onlookers could only exclaim: "Wow! Behold how they love one another". Their common life validated their gospel of peace.

And so it must always be. Only if people see a reconciled people in our homes and our congregations will they be able to hear our invitation to forsake the way of retaliation and violence. If I am not allowing the Holy Spirit to heal any brokenness in my relationship with my wife, I have little right to speak to my president about international reconciliation. If our Mennonite and Brethren in Christ congregations are not becoming truly reconciled communities, it is a tragic hypocrisy for us to try to tell secular governments how to overcome international hostility. It is a farce for the church to try to legislate what our congregations will not live. (Applause)

On the other hand, living models impact history. Even small groups of people practicing what they preach, laying down their lives for what they believe, influence society out of all proportion to their numbers. I believe the Lord of history wants to use our small family of Anabaptists scattered across the globe to help save lives and promote justice - in short, to help shape modern history at the end of this dangerous twentieth century.

### **Die By The Thousands**

But to do that, we must not only abandon mistaken ideas and embrace the full biblical concept of shalom. One more thing is needed. We must take up our cross and follow Him to Golgotha. We must be ready to die by the thousands.

Those who have believed in peace through the sword have not hesitated to die. Proudly, courageously, they have marched off to death. Again and again, they sacrificed bright futures to the tragic illusion that one more righteous crusade would bring peace in their time. For their loved ones, for justice, and for peace, they have laid down their lives by the millions.

Why do we pacifists think that our way - Jesus' way - to peace will involve so little cost? Unless we Mennonites and Brethren in Christ are ready to start to die by the thousands in dramatic vigorous new exploits for peace and justice, we should sadly confess that we really never meant what we said.

We did, of course, in earlier times. In previous centuries, we died for our convictions. But today we have grown soft and comfortable. We cling to our affluence and our respectability. On our way to Strasbourg my family visited a spot in Switzerland called the Anabaptist bridge. High up in the Swiss mountains our Mennonite ancestors met in secret under this bridge in order to avoid detection and death. As our family prayed together I felt pride and joy at their courageous faith, this courageous faith of our mothers and fathers. But I asked myself, do I have the courage to follow in their steps today?

Unless comfortable North American and European Mennonites and Brethren in Christ are prepared to risk injury and death in nonviolent opposition to the injustice our societies foster and assist in Central America the Philippines, and South Africa we dare never whisper another word about pacifism to our sisters and brothers in those desperate lands. Unless the Mennonites of Latin America are willing to risk the torture of dictators and the sneer of guerillas in an aggressive, active, yet non-violent reconciling search for justice, we should confess that we fear to obey the one we worship.

Unless we are ready to die developing new nonviolent attempts to reduce international conflict, we should confess that we never really meant the cross was an alternative to the sword. Unless the majority of our people in nuclear nations are ready as Anabaptist congregations to risk social disapproval and government harassment in a clear ringing call to live without nuclear weapons, we should sadly acknowledge that we have betrayed our peacemaking heritage. Making peace is as costly as waging war. Unless we are prepared to pay the cost of peacemaking, we have no right to claim the label or preach the message. (Applause)

Our world is at an impasse. The way of violence has led us to the brink of global annihilation. Desperately, our contemporaries look for an alternative. They will never find Jesus' way to peace credible unless those of us who have proudly preached it are willing to die for it.

Last spring I attended a conference on the nuclear arms race. I met a former chief of the U.S. Airforce. I talked about a new non-violent action in Nicaragua, the Witness for Peace. He said he would be ready to do that, because he was desperately searching for new ways to resolve international conflict. A number of us Mennonites and Brethren in Christ are involved in that. A few dozen Christians are on that border all the time, witnessing silently for peace. A few dozen of course cannot stop that war, but think of what a few thousand could do! What would happen if the Christian Church stationed as many praying Christians as the U.S. government has sent armed guerillas across that border?

What would happen if the Christian church today developed a new nonviolent peacekeeping force of 100,000 persons ready to move into violent conflicts and stand peacefully between warring parties in Central America, Northern Ireland, Poland, Southern Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan? Frequently we would get killed by the thousands. But everyone assumes that for the sake of peace it is moral and just for soldiers to get killed by the hundreds of thousands, even millions. Do we not have as much faith and courage as soldiers?

Again and again, I believe, praying, Spirit-filled Christians, in such peacekeeping forces would by God's special grace, be able to end the violence and nurture justice. We would discover that love for enemies is not utopian madness or destructive masochism but rather God's alternative to the centuries of escalating violence that now threatens the entire planet. But we must face the cross. The cross - death by the thousands by those who believe in Jesus -- is the only way to convince our violent world of the truth of Christ's alternative.

I want to plead with the Mennonites, Brethren in Christ, and others in the Historic Peace Churches to take the lead in a search for a new nonviolent approach to conflict resolution. We could spend 25 million dollars in the next three years developing a sophisticated, highly trained nonviolent peacekeeping force. The most sophisticated expertise in diplomacy, history, international politics, and logistics would be essential. So would a radical dependence on the Holy Spirit. Such a peacekeeping force of committed Christians would immerse all of its activity in intercessory prayer. There would be prayer chains in all our congregations as a few thousand of our best youth walked into the face of death, inviting all parties to end the violence and work together for justice.

If as a body we started such a program, we would, of course, invite the rest of the Christian church to join us. In fact, as the Witness for Peace effort in Nicaragua shows, other have already begun. If we are not careful, God will raise up others to live out the heritage we have feared to apply to the problems of our day. Together the Christian church could afford to train and deploy 100,000 Christians in a new nonviolent peacekeeping force. The result would not be utopia, or even the abolition of war. But it might tug our trembling planet back from the abyss.

I have one final plea. I know we live in a vicious, violent world. I know it takes more than winning smiles and moral advice to enable sinners to love their enemies. Sinners will never be able to fully follow Jesus' ethic. But they ought to. That they do not is the measure of their sinful rebellion. But regenerated Spirit-filled Christians can follow Jesus. Our only hope is a mighty peace revival that converts sinners and revives the church.

In the next decades, I believe we will see disaster and devastation on a scale never before realized in human history, unless God surprises our unbelieving world with a mighty worldwide peace revival. Therefore, my final plea is that we fall on our knees in intercessory prayer pleading with God for a global peace revival. At the worst of times in the past, God has broken into human history in mighty revivals that led to social movements that changed history. The Wesleyan revival in the eighteenth century resulted in Wilberforce's great crusade against slavery that changed the British Empire. The same could happen in the next few decades.

Pray that God revives millions of lukewarm Christians. Pray that God draws millions of non-Christians into a personal living relationship with the risen Lord. Pray that millions and millions of people in all the continents of our small planet come to see that Jesus is the way to peace and peace is the way of Jesus. Pray

that with our eyes fixed on the crucified one, the church will dare to pay the cost of being God's reconciling people in a broken world.

Today is the hour of decision. The long upward spiral of violence and counter violence today approaches its catastrophic culmination. Either the world repents and changes or it self-destructs.

For centuries we Anabaptists have believed there is a different way, a better way. Our world needs that alternative. Now. But the world will be able to listen to our words only if large numbers of our people live what we say. Our best sons and daughters, our leaders, and all of our people must be ready to risk death. The cross comes before the resurrection.

There is finally only one question: Do we believe Jesus enough to pay the cost of following Him? Do you? Do I?