




A Reflection on the Role of the Church in Ensuring Societal Peace

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ABSTRACT

Human life and welfare are utterly dependent on peace. Peace is, thus, vital for the existence and sustainability of humanity. The quest for peace has become a necessity from the origination and existence of humanity. Hence, it has been incumbent on the Church as an institution to be involved in the collaborative pursuit of peace in human society. This paper discusses biblical expositions on peace and how the Church as an institution can ensure peace in human society. This paper is relevant because it makes people aware that the phenomenon of peace has a biblical backing, and hence it is a divine requirement that the Church and humanity in general should do everything possible to ensure and sustain peace in human society. Using texts from the Bible and other secondary data resources from the internet, and published and unpublished literature in the form of books and journal articles, the authors discuss the concept of peace theologically and expound on the role of the Church in ensuring societal peace. This study is necessary because it uncovers what the Bible says about Peace and how the Church, whose operation is centered on the tenets of the Bible, can ensure peace in the society.

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INTRODUCTION

Peace is a critical and sensitive issue or phenomenon in the human society. The stability and survival of the human society are dependent on peace. Therefore, a discussion on peace is very crucial and hence should attract the interest of people. This article seeks to explore Biblical passages on the concept of Peace and how the Church performs its role of ensuring peace in the human society. In dealing with the topic, attention will be on two central questions: “What are the biblical teachings on peace?” and “What is the contribution of the church to peace in the society?” This paper highlights Biblical messages on Peace. It also discusses the Church’s contribution to peace in the society. Much reference is made to the Bible and other academic writings or research works on Christianity and ways of ensuring peace in the society. The findings from the literary works are discussed and analyzed for better insight into Christianity and peace.

Definition of Peace

Considering the etymology of the word “peace”, it can be said to be from the Latin word *pax*, which implies “freedom from civil disorder”. Originally, the English word ‘peace’ was used in several personal greetings as a translation of the Hebrew term ‘shalom’. However, such a translation is

imprecise as *shalom*, which is similar to the Arabic term "salaam" and, has several meanings aside from peace. More generally, the term encompasses virtues such as good fortune, justice, safety, security, equity, well-being, prosperity, and social openness.

In essence, peace is a sign of harmony which depicts the absence of violence and conflict behaviours and the non-existence of fear of violence. Although peace is usually acknowledged as the absence of hostility, it also encapsulates the presence of harmonious, interpersonal or universal relationships, socio-economic prosperity, the presence of equality and a functioning political order that suits the benefits of all people. Peace is also seen as the presence of law or orderly governance, the prevalence of justice and a balance of powers.¹ In other words, peace is a stress-free state of security and calmness that originates when there is no fighting or war, everything coexisting in perfect harmony and freedom.²

From the perspective of religion, peace may be defined and informed by a harmonious relationship with God or in terms of inner contentment and a sense of security. It involves the assurance and inner conviction that in spite of the reality of the forces of negation such as war, hostilities, lack of public security, economic insecurity, one has an inner sense of security, a feeling of contentment and a feeling that it is well with one's soul.³

The Church

In this paper, the Church refers to the Christian community of believers. In essence, the Church comprises a united group of people devoted to a holistic dedication to Christ and of definite beliefs emanating from this devotion. Such beliefs are seen to be very relevant for the concretization of their humanity.⁴ According to Asante, all of this is to stress that the Church is a distinctive community of believers who profess Jesus Christ as risen Lord, irrespective of their race, nationality, complexion or language, and are united in a loving, caring, servicing, worshipping, witnessing and expectant fellowship.⁵

Moreover, the Church is a religious organization that has become institutionalized. It has survived for generations, sustained by the norms and values of the society, and has perpetually become a resilient part of society. Its involvement in society does not necessarily mean that it has compromised its essential values. However, it still retains the ability to protest injustice and immorality.⁶ Thus, the Church is by and large dedicated to working with society and it wishes to better the standards of society.⁷

According to Asante, Jesus' ministry which is barely the most crucial ministry of the Church, fundamentally has a positive implication for the evolution of human society not only in terms of personal thoughts and feelings, but also publicly in terms of law and governance.⁸ He further posits that the participation of the Church in the socio-cultural, economic and political development of human society has demonstrated that, whereas the Church strives to prevent any political affiliation of Christianity, the Church is significantly conscious that Christianity has a solid dimension relating

¹ Rummel, R.J. "What Is Peace?" in *Understanding Conflict and War: Vol. 5*, Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1981. Accessed: November 11, 2021 <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/TJP.CHAP2.HTM>.

² Definition of Peace, accessed June 1, 2022. <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/peace>

³ A lecture delivered on Peace, Security and Human Rights at the 2010 New Year School at the K. A. Busia Hall, Legon on the 5th of January 2010 by The Most Rev. Professor Emmanuel Asante, former Presiding Bishop of Methodist Church Ghana. He is a former Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi.

⁴ Emmanuel Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship*, (Ghana: Wilas Press Limited, 1999), 145.

⁵ Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship*, 155.

⁶ David B. Brinkerhoff and Lyan K. White, *Sociology*, 2nd ed. (New York: West Publishing Company, 1988), 448.

⁷ Brinkerhoff and Lyan, *Sociology*, 449.

⁸ Emmanuel Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development: Ethical and Theological reflections on the Ghanaian experience*, Ghana: Challenge Enterprise, 2007, 101 ⁹ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 101.

to socio-political attitudes and commitments.⁹ The prophetic role of the Church, for Asante, is to encourage and empower Christians to devote action toward service to the society.⁹ The conditions of human society in the realm of injustice, human right abuse, economic inequality and moral decadence should be of serious interest to the Church. Thus, the nation's social, economic and political situations of which the continuous and consistent yearning for peace is integral constitute the context within which the Christian conviction must be practicalized.

For the Church to fruitfully serve its purpose as a religious institution that ensures hope and empowers people to endure the present-day situations of socio-economic and political prejudice and hardships, it must practically make a bold and uninterrupted move directed at safeguarding peace in the human society.

In view of the Church being a body pre-conditioned and governed by biblical teachings, it will be important to examine some biblical teachings or expositions on peace. After that, there will be a discussion on how the Church, whose teachings and practices are defined and informed by the message of the Bible, plays a role in ensuring peace in the society.

BIBLICAL TEACHINGS ON PEACE

The Concept of Peace in the Old Testament

Considering the concepts "the Church" and "Peace", one may ask if Christians can get some guiding principles or moral codes from the scripture regarding their participation in ensuring peace in the society. In other words, are there some standards or ideals that they can follow while seeking peace, and what are God's articulated teachings regarding Christians' involvement in ensuring peace in the society? These are some of the questions that come to mind when one thinks of the topic of peace in the Bible and the human society.

The Old Testament word which implies peace is *shalom*. According to Hebrew speakers, the word *shalom* carries greater significance than the English word "peace." While people usually restrict the knowledge of peace to the non-existence of conflict, *shalom* comprises far more than that. It encompasses perceptions of soundness, completeness and prosperity.¹⁰

Creation and Peace

The Old Testament presents peace to be God's perfect gift to humankind and a human scheme in line with His divine plan. Therefore, peace is a significant attribute of God; for example, "the Lord is peace" (Jgs. 6:24). God brought into existence everything that exists, and the entirety of creation constitutes a pleasant whole that is unambiguously good in its wholeness (Gen. 1:4). Peace was established as a premise characterizing the significant connection prevailing between humanity and God. This is a relationship manifested by righteousness and obedience (Gen. 17:1).

God's intention for the created cosmos was that it should be characterized by peace. Nonetheless, human sin counteracted God's intention, so that brokenness and disharmony permeated everything which God had planned to be eternally peaceful. The accounts of creation in Genesis expose the harmonious dimensions of the Creator's handiwork. Basically, no evidence of conflict is found in the first chapter of Genesis. It can also be sensed that all relationships are in harmony as creation seeks to accomplish God's intended purposes.¹² The same scenario is reflected in Genesis 2, where creation is visualized as a garden not only beautiful but also food-filled and peaceful (Gen. 2:8-9).

⁹ Asante, Culture, Politics and Development, 101.

¹⁰ Roberts, D. Mark. "Seeking the Peace of Christ: Christianity and Peacemaking". Published online in 2010.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/>. Accessed on November 10, 2021.

¹² Roberts, Seeking the Peace of Christ: Christianity and Peacemaking.

Peace and Righteousness and Justice

In the Old Testament, peace is identified with righteousness and justice. Righteousness here refers not only to practising moral deeds but to relate to others in a right manner. Moreover, righteousness is linked to justice, for the reason that righteous people act with justice in all their endeavours. The significant relation between righteousness and peace can be witnessed, for example, in Isaiah's vision about Israel which predicted that "Justice will rule in the wilderness and righteousness in the fertile field. And this righteousness will bring peace and quietness and confidence will fill the land forever" (Isa. 32:16-17).

Asante makes reference to the Old Testament and cautions people in authority to ensure peace and justice in the society as a civic responsibility which is inevitable in any way.¹¹ In his view, abuse of power is the outcome of a lack of realization that human authorities, be they civil or religious, derived from God and are subservient to Him. He opines that it follows that every civil or religious authority that is dehumanizing, oppressive and discriminative portrays bad stewardship of power and is subject to prophetic condemnation. This is the basis of the ministry of the eighth-century Prophets.¹² Belonging to such a school of thought is Kunhiyop who indicates that the Old Testament also makes it abundantly clear that those who are in positions of power in government are not to use their situation to accumulate wealth for themselves. Their task is to uphold justice and protect the weak.¹³ He indicates that God will judge rulers who support injustice, whether they are leaders of His own people or of other nations.

Peace is the fruit of justice that relates to respect for the equilibrium of all aspects of the individual. Peace is endangered when a person is deprived of everything he deserves as a person and when his self-worth or dignity is not appreciated fully. The holistic advocacy for human rights is crucial for the establishment of a peaceable society coupled with the fundamental development of people and nations.

In his book *Culture, Politics and Development*, Asante indicates that in the Old Testament, justice also refers to Yahweh's redemptive powers; His fidelity to His role as Lord of the covenant. Yahweh is involved in the human community overcoming forces of evil and releasing energies which foster harmony and peace in the human community.¹⁴ He even adds that justice points to the right ordering of social relationships and the just person conserves the peace and wholeness of the society. This is done through the avoidance of violence and fraud and other anti-social acts which destroy public life and the pursuit of everything capable of sustaining the life of the human society. Jeremiah's letter to the captives in Babylon confirms this by calling for peace in the country of their exile (Jer. 29:7).

According to Guthrie, in the Old Testament, righteousness in God means more than that. God always acts in a morally right way. It includes also the fact that God acts on behalf of His people when they are unjustly oppressed.¹⁵ Thus, God is revealed in the Old Testament as one who is compassionate to the oppressed and as one who vindicates the unjustly treated. To be in a covenant relationship with Him is to express concern for the poor and the oppressed. Failure to do justice to the marginalized was tantamount to the breaking of the covenant.¹⁶ According to Prophet Amos, the injustice of the rich and actions that inhibit peace in Israel negate their worship of Yahweh. For instance, God was to punish Israel because of their unfair treatment of the poor for they sold the righteous for silver and the needy for pair of shoes and they manhandled the poor (Amos 2:7).

¹¹ Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship*, 72.

¹² Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship*, 72.

¹³ Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, (Nairobi-Kenya: Hippo Books, 2008), 91.

¹⁴ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 103.

¹⁵ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, (U.S.A.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 99.

¹⁶ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 104.

¹⁹ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 104.

In the view of Asante, true religion is equated with the pursuit of justice which is the concrete expression of the very being of Yahweh. Justice involves love and mercy, the upholding of truth, vindication of the wrongfully treated, redemption of the oppressed and the promotion of just laws and statutes.¹⁷ He adds that justice promotes peace, and harmony in the social order. It frees from slavery and oppression and provides hope to the hopeless. To him, injustice in the Old Testament is not just a bad moral attitude. It is a social canker which destroys the society and a physical force which brings chaos to the good of the earth. Thus, acting justly, according to the Old Testament, is not acting in conformity to external norms or constitution but creating harmony and peace within the community.¹⁷

Peace as God's blessing

According to the Old Testament, the value of peace is greater than the ordinary non-existence of war. It signifies the completeness of life (Mal. 2:5). It is not man's handiwork, but a significantly greater gift that God offers to humanity, and it involves submission to God's sacred plan. Thus, peace is the result of the impeccable blessing that God confers on His people: "The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Num. 6:26). This kind of peace creates holistic well-being, fruitfulness, prosperity, absence of fear and profound joy. With peace being a sign of God's blessing, the Old Testament presents peace as a powerful and highly sought virtue in the society. Peace then becomes the goal of life in society,

The Concept of Peace in the New Testament

By implication, the promises of peace that characterize the entire Old Testament find their fulfillment in the personality of Jesus. The Messiahship of Jesus encompasses peace in which every significant effect of salvation is included. Thus, the Messianic kingdom is indeed a kingdom of peace. Jesus is said to be the peace of humanity who has disintegrated the enmity and discrimination among people and has reconciled them with God (Eph. 2:14-16).

Just before his death, Jesus spoke of his affectionate relationship with God and the uniting power and authority that this unflinching love brings to his disciples or followers. It is, in essence, a farewell address which discloses the deep meaning of his life and can thus be seen as a summary of all his teachings. In essence, the gift of peace seals the mission of Jesus: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you" (Jn. 14:27).

The New Testament presents Jesus as a strong and powerful advocate of peace in the society. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus unveiled that "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9). Jesus insisted that God's law centered on "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:38-40). His definition of who this neighbour is, includes political opponents, aggressors and even one's enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). Christians are not to seek revenge but rather pray for enemies who oppress them (Lk. 6:28). Romans 12:17-21 highlights Jesus' message that Christians should not "repay anyone's evil with evil" but leave vengeance to the Lord.

Jesus gave examples of how to respond to evil. The first example involves someone being slapped across the face by an oppressor. Jesus admonished that, instead of retaliating, the one slapped is to stand his ground and turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39-40). According to Wink, this act robs the opponent of the power to humiliate. In effect, the individual who deliberately turns the other cheek is saying "Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am human just like you. Your status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me."¹⁸ Wink adds that such a reply would create great difficulties for the striker. For him, this reply far from admonishing passivity and cowardice is an act of defiance.¹⁹

¹⁷ Asante. *Culture, Politics and Development*, 104.

¹⁸ Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 15.

¹⁹ Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, 15.

The response to Jesus' call to discipleship is not simply a hearing of Jesus' teaching but involves following and mission, and the disciple is called to be with Jesus to have the same authority to preach, heal and confront the powers of evil in the same way that Jesus did. True discipleship will express itself in a concern for justice in this world.²⁰ On that note, he indicates that, here, justice must be understood in terms of taking a stand against unjust policies and social, religious and political systems that discriminates and inhibits the peace and harmony expected to prevail in God's creation.

Cassidy summarizes Jesus' advocacy for peace in the following words.

"...Jesus' teaching regarding forgiveness constituted an important element in his general position with respect to violence. We now find Jesus himself practicing this teaching and actions relative to violence are thoroughly consistent. In particular circumstances, Jesus acts and speaks aggressively, but he always does so without doing or sanctioning violence to persons, and he continually witnesses to overriding love and forgiveness."²¹

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHURCH TO PEACE IN THE SOCIETY

In practical terms, religion has an active role to play in promoting reconciliation, peace, harmony and security with and within oneself, the society and the work at large. Religion also has a significant role in setting the standards by which or in reference to which the individual and the society may live. In effect, if all religions in Africa fail to make this significant contribution, they will have become anachronisms worse than salt without saltiness, and as such, they will lose their essence or role in contemporary Africa.²² Religious beliefs usually seek to recognize and deal with the fundamental challenges hampering human life and they include the conflicts or misunderstandings between individuals and societies. Gyekye states that; "Any list of moral values equated with the good in African societies would include kindness, compassion, generosity, hospitality, faithfulness, truthfulness, concern for others, and the action that brings peace, justice, dignity, respect, and happiness."²³ This statement appreciates the quest for peace as a moral value equated with the good in Africa, and for that matter, Ghanaian societies. Thus, peace here is promoted as a moral virtue worth pursuing.

Accordingly, the Church in Africa has to cultivate an understanding of the nature of conflicts and of how Christians should respond to them. It needs to be able to respond to questions about the attitude toward the use of violence as a means of addressing conflicts, and about how the Church and individual Christians should react to oppression or injustice by the government or other ethnic or religious groups.²⁷

This reflects Asante's position that the Church has a positive implication for the transformation of the human society not only in terms of personal thoughts and feelings but also publicly in terms of law, governance and economic life.²⁴ He further claims that the participation of the Church in the socio-cultural, political, moral and economic development of the society has portrayed that, whereas the Church strives to eradicate any manner of political inclination of the Christian faith, the Church is significantly conscious that Christianity has a solid dimension involving certain socio-political attitudes and commitments.²⁵ Thus, the prophetic role of the Church, for Asante, is to empower and motivate Christians toward service to humanity. The circumstances of the human society

²⁰ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 105.

²¹ Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics, and Society: A Study of Luke's Gospel*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books,

²² John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Hannover Street, Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 1989), 361.

²³ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, (Accra – Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 58.

²⁷ Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 107.

²⁴ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 101

²⁵ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 101.

encapsulating socio-political and economic injustice and human rights deprivation should be a matter of concern to everyone.²⁶

To control deviance by means of ensuring peace in the society, the Church can adopt the mechanism of social control. According to Kendall, social control refers to the systematic practices developed by social groups to encourage conformity and discourage deviance.²⁷ This requires a comprehensive and massive collaboration of both the leaders and members of the Church. When leaders of the Church preach reconciliation without having practically dedicated themselves to fighting for justice for the oppressed, they have not succeeded in their efforts. The Church must obviously be seen to be actively and practically partaking in an indomitable fight against injustice, oppression and ethnocentrism. This is because championing justice is the ultimate avenue for reducing religio-ethnic conflicts in the African setting.²⁸

To re-instate mutual relationships and recognition between separated peoples for the purpose of reconciliation, it is important to stimulate reverence for the universal right to peace which encourages the establishment of a human society in which structures of power allow for structures of cooperation in pursuant of the common good. Kunhiyop indicates that the Church has been called to a ministry of healing and reconciliation. Therefore, when others are the victims, the Church must demonstrate the caring attitude Jesus commended in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.²⁹

The Church can contribute to peace through its numerous teachings. Per the teachings of the Church, true peace is achievable only through forgiveness and reconciliation. None

theless, it is difficult to exhibit forgiveness when faced with the complications of war or conflict since violence, with its resultant suffering, brings about a heavy burden of pain. This agony can only be possibly reduced by a bold and honest reflection by all parties involved. That is a reflection that can ably face present challenges with a repentant attitude. With the presence of mutual forgiveness, the agonies of the past can be overcome. This exercise is quite a complicated process though, it is possible to embark on it and succeed in the end.

The Church can seek to ensure peace, harmony and serenity in the society through intensive and continuous prayer. The Church can win the battle for peace through intense and persistent prayer. Prayer is capable of opening the heart not only to an intimate bond with God but also to an encounter with other people conditioned by respect, love and understanding. Prayer instills courage and lends support to everyone who loves peace and continually strives to promote peace in all his endeavours.

Hence, for the Church to productively realize its aim as God's mission to humanity, it should champion its singular responsibility to proclaim salvation in Christ to the gregarious human.³⁰ The promotion of peace in human society is central to the Church's assignment to continue Christ's work of redeeming the world. Thus, the Church, per its mandate in Christ, must be an instrument of peace in the world and for the world. The advancement of real peace is a manifestation of the Christian faith in the perfect love that God has for and exhibits toward every human being.

CONCLUSION

Religion plays a significant role in keeping societies stable and preventing unforeseen changes that may destabilize human society. It provides moral and spiritual backing to the rules and laws of society.

As concerns the Church, the social message of the Gospel must not be seen a theory, but rather as a basis and inspiration for action. The action in view of this is by activating the prophetic role of the Church, which is to prepare and inspire Christians to address the ills of human society. Therefore, to be able to dutifully attain its goal as a religious body that champions hope and empowers people to

²⁶ Asante, *Culture, Politics and Development*, 101.

²⁷ Diana Kendall et al, *Sociology in Our Times*, (Canada: Thomson Nelson, 2007), 543.

²⁸ Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 122.

²⁹ Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 121.

³⁰ Asante, *Stewardship: Essays on Ethics of Stewardship*, 146.

endure the contemporary situations of socio-economic and political injustice, the Church must be seen practically making a bold and uninterrupted move towards safeguarding peace in human society.

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