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TAKING SIDES

We live today in a world of conflict: between governments and the peace movements, between trades unions and employers, between feminists and male-dominated institutions. In El Salvador and Guatemala conflicts between the rich and the poor cost countless lives. In South Africa the situation has been described as a total conflict and military chiefs have called it total war.

There may be differences of opinion about the nature of a particular conflict, whether it is a racial conflict or a class conflict, or whether the conflict might be resolved by peaceful negotiation rather than the use of force. But for many people in the world the fact of a conflict, which may encompass every aspect of their lives, can hardly be doubted.

Taking sides

This poses very important questions for us as Christians. What should be our attitude to the conflicts in which we find ourselves and which we see around us? Should we take sides or must we always remain neutral?

It is as well to make it clear from the start that these questions are distinct from the question of using or not

using violence. People in Northern Ireland, for example, may hope fervently for a united Ireland or for continued union with Britain — they may, in other words, 'take sides' — while rejecting the use of violence to achieve it. We are not in this pamphlet discussing the question of whether or not there are occasions when the use of violence in pursuit of justice is justified. In countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and South Africa it is often almost impossible to disentangle the question of taking sides and the question of violence, but it is nonetheless a separate question and one that has to be talked about quite separately in the light of the gospel.

To many of us it is pretty obvious that there are some conflicts in which we ought to take sides. But what about the Christian belief in reconciliation, forgiveness and peace? How can you take sides if you love everybody, including your enemies? And how do we account for the widespread belief that in any conflict a Christian should be a peacemaker who avoids taking sides and tries to bring about a reconciliation between the opposing forces?

This belief rests on a mistaken understanding of reconciliation. We have all heard people say: We must be fair, we must listen to both sides of the story; there is always right and wrong on both sides. If we could only get people to talk to one another to sort out their misunderstandings and misconceptions of one another the conflict could be resolved. On the face of it this sounds very Christian. It sounds like a genuine concern for fairness and justice.

Three common mistakes

So what is wrong with this argument?

In the first place it makes reconciliation an *absolute principle* that must be applied in *all* cases of conflict. The model or example that it envisages is that of what one

might call the "private quarrel" between two people who are being argumentative and not trying to understand one another and whose differences are based upon misunderstandings. *But not all conflicts are like this.* In some conflicts one side is right and the other wrong, one side is being unjust and oppressive and the other is suffering injustice and oppression. In such cases a policy of seeking consensus and not taking sides would be quite wrong. Christians are not supposed to try to reconcile good and evil, justice and injustice; we are supposed to do away with evil, injustice and sin.

The first mistake, then, is the assumption that all conflicts are based upon misunderstandings and that there is always blame on both sides. There is no evidence for believing that this is always the case, either in conflicts between individuals or in conflicts between groups in society. It is an unfounded assumption that has nothing whatsoever to do with Christianity. It is an assumption that could only be made by people who do not suffer under injustice and oppression or who do not really appreciate the sinfulness and evil of what is happening.

The second mistake in this argument is that it assumes that a person can be neutral in all cases of conflict. In fact, neutrality is not always possible, and in cases of conflict due to injustice and oppression neutrality is totally impossible. If we do not take sides with the oppressed, then we are, albeit unintentionally, taking sides with the oppressor. 'Bringing the two sides together' in such cases is actually extremely beneficial to the oppressor, because it enables the status quo to be maintained; it hides the true nature of the conflict, keeps the oppressed quiet and passive and it brings about a kind of pseudo-reconciliation without justice. The injustice continues and everybody is made to feel that the injustice doesn't matter because the tension and conflict have been reduced.

This brings us to the third mistake. The commonly

held view that Christians should always seek harmony and a 'middle way' in every dispute assumes that tension and conflict are worse evils than injustice and oppression. This again is a false supposition based upon a lack of compassion for those who suffer under oppression. Those who are afraid of conflict or confrontation, even when it is non-violent, are usually those who are not convinced of the need for change. Their caution hides an un-Christian pessimism about the future, a lack of hope. Or they use the Christian concern for reconciliation to justify a form of escapism from the realities of injustice and conflict.

All in all, these mistakes about Christian reconciliation are not simply a matter of misunderstandings but come from a lack of real love and compassion for those who are suffering, or from a lack of appreciation of what is really happening in a grave conflict. In the final analysis, the insistent pursuit of an illusory neutrality in every conflict is a way of siding with the oppressor.

True reconciliation

What then is the true meaning of reconciliation? What does reconciliation mean in the Bible?

The history of the Jewish people in the Bible is very much a history of conflict with the pagan nations. This conflict and confrontation is not merely encouraged by God; he actually commands the people again and again to oppose the tyranny and injustice and immorality of the pagan nations. One of the greatest sins of the Jewish nation was their attempt to be reconciled with the pagan nations who oppressed them. When the people shouted 'Peace, peace', Jeremiah responds by saying there is no peace and never can be peace without change or conversion.

Some people today ignore this because they say that the New Testament is different and that Jesus brought a

message of peace and reconciliation. It is of course true that one of the things that Jesus wished to hand on to his disciples was his peace, and that he said: 'Blessed are the peacemakers,' but this must be understood in the context of the much more remarkable saying we inherit from Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

'Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth?' (The question is interesting. It seems to suggest that there were people who *did* 'suppose' that Jesus had come to bring peace on earth.) 'No, I tell you, but rather dissension. For from now on a household will be divided: three against two, and two against three: the father divided against the son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law' (Lk 12:51-53; Mt 10:34-36)

Most of this is a quotation from the prophet Micah (7:6), who was deploring the conflict between parents and children. Jesus used the quote to say that this is just the kind of conflict and dissension that he will bring. And of course this is exactly what he did do. Not because he wanted to bring dissension and conflict for their own sake, but because his uncompromising stance inevitably divided the people into those who were for him and those who were against him.

Moreover, in the already existing conflict between Pharisees and the so-called 'sinners' he sided with the sinners, prostitutes and tax-collectors against the Pharisees. And in the conflict between the rich and the poor he sided with the poor. Jesus did not treat each side as equally right or equally wrong, or only needing to overcome their misunderstandings about one another. He condemns the Pharisees and the rich in no uncertain terms, and he forgives the sinners and blesses the poor. In fact he enters right into the conflict with the Pharisees and the rich to such an extent that they set out to discredit him, arrest

him, charge him and execute him. Jesus makes no attempt to compromise with the authorities for the sake of a false peace or reconciliation or unity.

On the other hand there are times when Jesus does try to reconcile people who have been in conflict with one another, e.g. Jews and Samaritans, Zealots and tax-collectors, some individual Pharisees and sinners or the poor, etc. And it was probably for this reason that he was known as a man of peace.

But how is one to reconcile these two apparently contradictory approaches to conflict?

Jesus made a distinction between the peace that God wants, and the peace that the world wants (Jn 14:27). The peace that God wants is a peace that is based on truth, justice and love. The peace that the world offers us is a superficial peace and unity that compromises the truth, that covers over the injustices and that is usually settled on for thoroughly selfish purposes. Jesus destroys this false peace and even highlights the conflicts in order to promote a true and lasting peace. There is no question of preserving peace and unity at all costs, even at the cost of truth and justice. Rather it is a matter of promoting truth and justice at all costs, even at the cost of creating conflict and dissension along the way.

Thomas Aquinas makes this same point by distinguishing between *peace* and *concord*, pointing out that concord is possible between thieves and murderers but that true peace is based upon genuine love.

Different kinds of conflict

We noted before that there are different kinds of conflict. We must analyse each situation and respond accordingly. If one side is right we must recognise this and side with them. If the other side is wrong and in power, we must

oppose them and dethrone them from power. Furthermore we must analyse the reasons for the conflict, the interests that are at stake and the dynamics of change through conflict. The idea that all one has to do is talk nicely to both sides and they will be reconciled is simply not true in most cases of conflict, especially conflicts between groups or interests rather than individuals. There are often social forces at play that make change and conflict much more difficult and complicated than that.

On the other hand we may discover that both sides are basically right, that both sides are working for justice. In such cases reconciliation is very important in order to create a co-operative solidarity in the struggle against injustice. And if we discover that both sides are wrong and that both are part of the oppression, then both must be confronted. And then, obviously, we don't try to reconcile them in their differences about the most effective way to oppress others.

Structural conflict

It is important to realise that to get to the real root of many conflicts we have to begin to think in structural terms — in other words, that not just individuals may be right or wrong, but the way societies are structured may itself be right or wrong. In some cases there is a *structural* conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the rich and the poor. It is not a personal squabble. In these cases we cannot and should not impute guilt to the individuals concerned, nor should we treat everyone on the one side as blameless and everyone on the other side as guilty. Structurally, the cause of the poor and the oppressed is right and just, no matter what individual poor people may be like in their personal and private lives. And the cause of the rich and oppressor is wrong no matter how honest and sincere and unaware they may be.

Thus in the Magnificat or Song of Mary in the gospel

of Luke, Mary says that it is God who 'pulls down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty' (Lk 1:52-53). This does not mean that God hates the rich and the powerful and that he wants to destroy them as people. It simply means that he wants to pull the rich and powerful from their thrones; from their position in society, because the structures of that society are unjust and oppressive.

This is the sense in which we must be on the side of the poor if we want to be on God's side. We must take an option for the poor, for the sake of both the poor and the rich as individual people. In fact, within this situation of structural conflict the only way to love everyone is to side with the poor and the oppressed. Anything else is simply a way of siding with oppression and injustice.

Loving our enemies

This brings us to the question of loving our enemies. Here we must first point out that the commandment to love one's enemies only makes sense once we recognise that we do have enemies, and that they are really and truly our enemies. When people hate you and curse you and oppress you Jesus does not say that you must pretend that they are not your enemies. They are. And when he says you must love them despite this, he does not mean that you must avoid any conflict or confrontation with them.

Confrontation and conflict does not, and need not necessarily, entail hatred. Class conflict and class struggle, which Christians have traditionally been reluctant to acknowledge, do not necessarily entail hatred. Such struggles may in fact be the only effective way of changing the situation, the only effective way of pulling down the mighty from their thrones.

Those who maintain an unjust distribution of wealth

and power and those who prop up their thrones are in fact our enemies. They are everybody's enemies; they are even the enemies of their own humanity. As a group or class they will never come down from their thrones willingly or voluntarily. A few individuals here and there may do so, but there will always be others to replace them. The ruling class as a whole cannot step down: we will have to pull them down from their thrones. Not in order to sit on those thrones ourselves, or to put others on them, but in order to destroy thrones.

The temptation for a Christian is to think that the most loving thing to do is to convert one by one those who sit on the thrones of injustice and thus to destroy the system. But change does not happen that way, because as long as the throne remains it will always be filled by others and the oppression will remain. The only effective way of loving our enemies is to engage in action that will destroy the system that makes them our enemies. In other words, for the sake of love and for the sake of true peace, we must side with the poor and the oppressed and confront the rich and powerful, and join the conflict or struggle against them, or rather against what they stand for and what they are defending.

In countries marked by grave injustice, joining the conflict, not judging it from a distance, is the only effective way of bringing about the peace that God wants. To take an example closer to home: in countries possessing nuclear weapons, there may be no short cut around conflict with governments if the world is to progress towards disarmament. It is not possible to 'balance' or 'reconcile' the needs of the forty million people who die from starvation each year in the Third World with the needs of arms manufacturers and military strategists or the demands of a few wealthy nations to be able to destroy any potential attacker many times over. Decisions have to be made; one has to 'take sides'.