

1 Presented to:  
2 Canadian Council of Churches at  
3 **Faith and the Public Square:**  
4 **The Church's Witness to Peace**  
5  
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7 General Secretary  
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10  
11 *For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has*  
12 *broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ....that he*  
13 *might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making*  
14 *peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the*  
15 *cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and*  
16 *proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were*  
17 *near; ..... (Ephesians 2:14-18; NRSV).*  
18

### 19 **Where do we stand?**

20  
21 Our task is to reflect on our Church's responsibility as a witness to the peace of  
22 Jesus Christ in a torn and violent world. What platform are we standing on as we  
23 share this witness to peace? What is the Holy Spirit nudging us toward as we  
24 struggle to be faithful to its divine presence within and among us?  
25

26 We stand on the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We stand in Canada, one of the  
27 wealthiest nations on earth. We stand within the Christian Church. We stand  
28 within our own broken, sinful, human condition. We stand in a world that does not  
29 function as it should. We stand within the conviction that all people are created by  
30 the same God, a conviction that inextricably ties us all together in human  
31 solidarity.  
32

33 We stand at the end of the most violent and inhumane century known in the history  
34 of humankind.<sup>1</sup> That fact itself calls the church to new imagination and courage to  
35 forge new paths for peace. The old strategies for peace have not delivered what has  
36 been so deeply desired and so fervently promised. We cannot expect different  
37 results by continuing to do the same thing.  
38

39 We stand in a world that desperately cries out for peace with justice. We stand in a  
40 spiritually alive world that is looking for a word of hope and a new paradigm for

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Scribner, 1993) p. 17. This study estimates that 167-175 million persons were killed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to "politically motivated carnage." These numbers do not include killing by crime or other forms of murder.

1 peace from those who proclaim that the Prince of Peace has come, is among us,  
2 and is our Lord.

3  
4 We stand in a world of religious passion; passion that is frequently used to justify  
5 the violent and inhumane ways we relate to each other and those around us. We  
6 stand within Christian ecclesial and other religious traditions that continue to  
7 justify violence and killing when it is 'justifiable.' Our religious traditions continue  
8 to advocate for, participate in, and bless peace-making strategies that are  
9 committed to the successful use of violence.

10  
11 We stand in a new century crying out for new and serious paradigms for peace-  
12 building, and that understandably looks to the Christian church as a fountain and  
13 source for guidance, inspiration, and hope in this quest for a peaceful and just  
14 world.

15  
16 Ultimately, we all stand in the need of confession. The rich and profound nature of  
17 biblical *shalom* has, unfortunately, not always been our paradigm for action and  
18 ministry. We have each, in our own way, reduced *shalom* to manageable  
19 preferences. Wealth, power, individualism, comfort, and an aversion to suffering  
20 have all contributed to our reluctance to fully embrace the *shalom* of God for  
21 ourselves and for the world. Part of the confession of this presentation is that here  
22 too our focus will be narrow, namely we will focus primarily on overt violence,  
23 recognizing that it is but one dimension of the lack of *shalom* in our Christian  
24 witness.

25  
26 **What are the questions?**

27  
28 When we ponder the most appropriate role and contribution of the Christian  
29 church in our quest for global peace, many questions emerge. What does it mean to  
30 be a people of God committed to *shalom* in all its dimensions? Is there a distinctive  
31 message that Christian churches have when we think about how best to nurture and  
32 act upon biblical *shalom* within and beyond our church communities? What  
33 difference does it make that we proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth (and not Joshua,  
34 son of Nun) is the Lord of our ecclesial vision and our personal ethics? How can  
35 we encourage and participate in a peace-web that nurtures a culture of peace  
36 regardless of its inspirational source? Is there a distinctive focus that churches  
37 from Canada might wish to suggest to the larger world communion of churches  
38 and to the civil societies of which we are a part? What are some new things we  
39 need to consider for peace in such a time as this, and what are the old things that  
40 we need to discard?

41  
42 There are also questions related to the historic and actual role of Christians and  
43 churches in addressing issues of peace and conflict in our world. The spectrum of  
44 how Christians, and our hermeneutical traditions, have justified and blessed  
45 Christian participation in violent methods with the hope of generating peace is well  
46 known. The spectrum includes holy war, preventive strikes, offensive combat,

1 peace-making, peace-keeping, self-defense, the responsibility to protect, and  
2 capital punishment (among others). There are two common threads that run  
3 through this spectrum. One is the implicit confidence that criteria to limit the use  
4 of violence can be established and will be followed in order to enhance security  
5 and nurture a peaceful world. The second common thread is the assumption that  
6 biblical hermeneutics ultimately lend themselves to justify violent responses as  
7 being biblically faithful responses that reflect the will of God. Such responses are  
8 thereby considered justifiable as expressions of the Lordship of Jesus in our  
9 personal and ecclesial lives.

10  
11 The rationale that justifies Christian participation in and support of violence and  
12 war as justifiable mechanisms to achieve peace has deep historical, philosophical,  
13 and theological roots. We can think of this as a “yes..... but....” paradigm. Its  
14 instinctive hermeneutical/ethical assumption is: yes - violence can be justified, ...  
15 but - criteria need to be established for its justifiable use.

### 16 17 **What is the primary question?**

18  
19 In a personal note to me, Karen Hamilton, the General Secretary of the Canadian  
20 Council of Churches, indicated that she was having difficulty coming up with a  
21 “title” for the discussion on peace they were proposing for the CCC agenda. I  
22 believe she has, perhaps inadvertently, put her finger on the very central issue for  
23 the CCC table, i.e., What is it exactly that we *can* talk about together when it  
24 comes to sharing perspectives on peace and non-violence? In addressing an issue  
25 as large as the Christian witness to peace in the Public Square, in a group as  
26 diverse as those around the table at the CCC, it is critically important that we  
27 identify as clearly as possible *the* primary question that makes sense to pursue as a  
28 Council. And we should not underestimate the difficulty of doing so. The primary  
29 question will need to come from the core of our identity, not from the margins. It  
30 will need to challenge as well as inspire us. It will need to emerge from shared  
31 convictions and not disparate ones. We will need to proceed in a spirit of  
32 confession. And we will need to generate the courage to trust in new possibilities  
33 that are becoming increasingly compelling.

34  
35 I would suggest that there indeed is such a question, and that we do need to pursue  
36 it. We often say that there *is* one thing that allows the ecumenical table to function.  
37 It is our common and passionate commitment to the triune God, and within that  
38 commitment, our belief that the risen Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord of our ecclesial  
39 life, our communal presence in the Public Square, and the personal ethic of each  
40 transformed person who has committed to Jesus' Lordship in his/her life. And so I  
41 believe that the primary question that can (and should) serve as *the* question for us  
42 at this table is:

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

1 We need to explore the value that the Christian *gospel* (as defined by the life,  
2 teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus) adds to the *torah* and the *wisdom*  
3 traditions available to us before the coming of Jesus. That is, what difference does  
4 it make that our common Christian scriptures personify Jesus as *torah* and *wisdom*  
5 incarnate, and that personal and ecclesial faithfulness to God's reign now need to  
6 be understood via this Jesus-grid?  
7

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

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

### 17 **What are the starting points?**

18  
19 The CCC focus on 'Christian Faith and the Public Square' points to a very broad  
20 agenda. Christian experience and biblical hermeneutics have sensed inherent  
21 tensions in our attempts to understand that the incarnation of *torah* and *wisdom* in  
22 Jesus is *gospel*. These tensions have led to numerous responses.  
23

- 24 1) One response has been to separate this *gospel* into dispensational time-zones in  
25 which the *ideal* for peace proclaimed by Jesus is understood to be for all and  
26 for all-time, but in which the *strategies* for peace employed by Jesus (i.e.,  
27 loving the enemy, non-violence, and the inevitability of suffering) are defined  
28 by time-zones. This focus suggests that while such strategies may be  
29 authoritative in some future time-zone, they are not normative now.  
30
- 31 2) Another response has been that we continue to live in two kingdoms: the one  
32 inaugurated (but not yet consummated) by Jesus; the other, the kingdom of  
33 "this world" and the anti-godly principalities and values represented within it.  
34 This response has pointed to two possibilities. One is that while we understand  
35 *how* we would need to live in the unconsummated kingdom of Jesus, there are  
36 moments when we don't *need* to. That is, there are times when we must submit  
37 to the lesser strategies of the worldly kingdoms, e.g., violence, in order to live  
38 within them. The other possibility is that we attempt to insulate ourselves from  
39 the worldly kingdom by trying to withdraw from it.  
40
- 41 3) Another hermeneutical response has been to posit a gulf between the *gospel* as  
42 lived and taught by Jesus, and the teachings of other inspired authors of the  
43 New Testament, such as Paul and Peter. This hermeneutic has suggested that  
44 we must allow the authorities of the pagan world to define the personal and  
45 communal ethics of the Christian community, even when they call the  
46 Christian church to non-*gospel* activity. Hermeneutical appeals to Romans 13

1            abound in this effort to demonstrate why the non-violent *gospel* of Jesus must  
2            be modified in order to fulfill our responsibilities as citizens.

- 3  
4            4) Yet another response has been one of lament. While the vision and the  
5            strategies/ethics toward peace, as lived and taught by a carpenter from  
6            Nazareth, are admirable in the rural simplicity of his time, they simply are not  
7            adequate, and therefore not applicable in dealing with the wild complexities of  
8            our century. Ultimately, this means that while the comprehensive *gospel* of  
9            peace is *nice*, it is not particularly *relevant* to our lives.

10  
11        **What is the primary starting point?**

12  
13            The understanding that Jesus lived a non-violent personal ethic and advocated the  
14            same for his followers is virtually uncontested within hermeneutically serious  
15            ecumenical (and even inter-faith) circles. Pope Benedict XVI – just as one example  
16            - in his recent address to a delegation from our church (Mennonite), and  
17            referencing the joint Mennonite/Catholic statement “Called Together to be  
18            Peacemakers,” stated:

19                    We both emphasize that our work for peace is rooted in Jesus Christ "who  
20                    is our peace, who has made us both one making peace that he might  
21                    reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross (Eph 2:14-16)"  
22                    (Report No. 174). We both understand that "reconciliation, *nonviolence*,  
23                    and active peacemaking *belong to the heart* of the Gospel (cf. Mt 5:9; Rom  
24                    12:14-21; Eph 6:15)" (Libreria Editrice Vaticana; Oct./07; italics added).

25  
26            The Jesus-way was to choose non-violent love in order to break the spiral of  
27            violence, revenge, and retaliation. He chose this way even though it would lead to  
28            rebuke, suffering, and death. Not only did Jesus live this way, he taught his  
29            disciples (and the communities they were to forge) to do so as well. What *is* hotly  
30            contested in ecumenical circles is the normative authority that his choices need to  
31            exercise over our own personal and ecclesial choices now. This non-consensus,  
32            indeed, is on the table for discussion among us today.

33  
34            Jesus' hermeneutical preference and resulting ethic were not marginal to, optional  
35            for, or superficial choices within the *gospel*. They were and are right at the heart  
36            and essence of the *gospel*. They were profound ways of defining power and his  
37            relationship to power. The cross, the central - and ecumenically common - symbol  
38            of salvation, is the clearest evidence we have how serious Jesus was about the non-  
39            violent nature of the kingdom-paradigm that was to be normative for him and was  
40            meant to be such for his followers. Too often the cross is understood as weakness  
41            in the face of power rather than the ultimate symbol of divine strength in the face  
42            of human weakness.

43  
44            Paul articulates a key ethical implication of following Jesus in the way of the cross.  
45            He states:

1                    *Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the*  
2                    *rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present*  
3                    *darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph.*  
4                    *6:12; NRSV).*

5  
6                    What he is saying is what Jesus also believed, namely that we should not consider  
7                    our enemies to be “people,” i.e., blood and flesh. Rather our enemies are those  
8                    powerful forces that nurture and shape the imaginations of people, and that provide  
9                    the conceptual foundations that encourage, nourish, justify, and free people to  
10                    choose evil and sinful ways. Unless we can engage these forces controlling our  
11                    imaginations, we will not encounter the enemy.

12  
13                    *Thus, I believe that the primary starting point for us is to focus on the meaning and*  
14                    *relevance of the non-violent strategy of Jesus, and the resulting suffering, as*  
15                    *indispensable companions to his vision for peace.*

16  
17                    We need to renew our commitment to the very real possibility that suffering may  
18                    be a necessary salvific component to what makes peace possible. We regularly  
19                    celebrate such saving sacrifice in our sacraments and ordinances. We must find  
20                    new ways of moving our commitment to non-violent suffering from liturgical  
21                    sacrament to personal and ecclesial ethics.

22  
23                    Neither of these starting points, namely our confidence in non-violent strategies for  
24                    the sake of peace nor our willingness to suffer for the integrity of the gospel of  
25                    peace, have been or are front-burner commitments for the church today. We need  
26                    to grapple seriously with these as primary starting points if we want to be true to  
27                    the way that Jesus incarnates *torah* and *wisdom* in order to become *gospel* for us. If  
28                    it is too much to ask that we adjust our ‘yes... but..’ instincts to a ‘no ....never..’  
29                    paradigm, at the very least we need to consider the possibility of moving toward a  
30                    middle axiom, namely a “no ...but...” instinct. This would mean that we allow  
31                    ourselves to contemplate a ‘no... but...’ response only after overcoming our  
32                    powerful gospel instincts of ‘no... never...’

### 33 34                    **A call to respond**

35  
36                    We are inaugurating a new century. We are Canadian churches and we can ride the  
37                    coat-tails of the considerable good-will that Canada’s reputation as a peace-loving  
38                    nation has generated in the global community. More importantly, we are determined to  
39                    be churches that are committed to our faith and eager to live our lives as the Body of  
40                    the Christ who is the Prince of Peace, the Lord of our imaginations and our activities.  
41                    Allow me to suggest some important initiatives that could come from us:

- 42  
43                    1) We need to spend more time together discerning how peace might look in the  
44                    ‘Ecclesial Square.’ Without this, our witness to faith in the ‘Public Square’ will  
45                    inevitably uncover the inconsistencies among us and will not reflect the integrity  
46                    we seek. How can we more fully live our proclamation of peace? How can our

1 ecclesial lives demonstrate more abundantly the sacrament of non-violent love for  
2 each other, our neighbor, and our enemy? How can our ecclesial purposes be more  
3 profusely committed to be communities of the Prince of Peace? These are  
4 important themes for discussion at the ecumenical table where our individual  
5 identities impact the integrity of our common witness.  
6

7 2) I am aware of the important nature of the questions that lie behind our desire to be  
8 faithful peace-makers. These questions often have to do with the stance of the  
9 church in the thorny, political, national, and international situations crying out for  
10 urgent responses. It is my sense, however, that spending time on internal  
11 conversations is not a waste of time, nor is it avoiding the other issues, nor is it  
12 substituting our broader agenda with a narrower focus. It is, rather, a critically  
13 important way of responding to the need for peace with an integral gospel for  
14 peace in which what we desire and proclaim is already a reflection of how we live  
15 with each other. Biblically speaking, I am suggesting that we must not too easily  
16 leap over Matthew 18 in order to rush to Romans 13, i.e., our witness to Christ's  
17 rule among the nations must have its foundation in the rule of Christ within the  
18 church.  
19

20 3) Matthew 18 focuses our attention on the importance of our internal ecclesial  
21 processes for integral witness to the gospel. Yet, it is apparent that much war,  
22 violence, and killing have been and continue to be perpetrated by Christians  
23 dealing with other Christians. This is true not only in the most overt examples such  
24 as Northern Ireland and England. It is also true in the massive killing machines of  
25 the Second World War (55 million killed; 31 million of which were in Christian  
26 Russia, Poland, and Germany). It was true in the Civil War of the USA as well as  
27 their war of Independence. It was true in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Catholics,  
28 Reformed and Lutheran churches hunted down Anabaptists and Mennonites, and  
29 then tortured, beheaded, and burnt them at the stake. More recently Kosovo was  
30 bombed by largely Catholic and Protestant nations, while Russia defended the  
31 Serbs. During the Korean War, western Christian forces virtually obliterated  
32 Pyongyang, now capital of North Korea, a city having a high percentage of  
33 Christians due to western Protestant missionary activity. About 90% of the  
34 population of Rwanda identifies itself as Christian, and the numbers are higher in  
35 most Latin American countries. It is entirely common for revolution, genocide,  
36 massacre, and mass murder to be committed by Christians against Christians.  
37 There is indeed much to do in the Ecclesial Square as we continue to contemplate  
38 our witness within the Public Square.  
39

40 4) If "*nonviolence belongs to the heart of the gospel*," as Mennonites and Catholics  
41 (and many others) have come to agree, it is time that we make some fundamental  
42 commitments to each other within the 'Ecclesial Square.' Indeed, it is indefensible  
43 not to do so. We need to face the fact that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and before) much of  
44 the violence, war, and killing was perpetrated between and among Christians. And  
45 this needs to change. Christians, in the name of Christ, must commit to stop killing  
46 other Christians in the name of civic responsibility, national security, and biblical

1 hermeneutics. Specifically, Baptists must commit to stop killing other Baptists  
2 even when other authorities insist that they do so. Anglicans must commit not only  
3 to stop killing Anglicans but also to stop killing Baptists. We all need to commit to  
4 stop killing Catholics and Catholics need to commit to stop killing Pentecostals. In  
5 our own tradition (Mennonite), the spirit of the violent revolutionary wing of the  
6 Anabaptists, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Münsterites, and more recently the spirit of the  
7 reactionary Mennonite *selbstschutz* groups in the Bolshevik revolution of the 1920s,  
8 must not become the assumed norms for strategic initiative or defense for Christian  
9 living in a violent world. Furthermore, Mennonites need to stop choosing which  
10 killings they prefer to ignore in the name of their own self-interest. For all of us, it  
11 is time to move beyond those things that allow us to justify such activity within the  
12 Ecclesial Square so that our witness beyond the Ecclesial Square can enjoy the  
13 integrity it is meant to have. Such commitment is not simply a strategic move for  
14 potential peace in the world, although it may well be the most effective thing  
15 toward that end that we have ever done. It is, more importantly, a move toward  
16 fuller obedience to the presence of the Holy Paraclete promised by Jesus and the  
17 gospel of the Prince of Peace whom we identify as the Lord of our ecclesial and  
18 ecumenical lives. And ever fuller obedience to Jesus, the Prince of Peace, must be  
19 seen by all Christians as a self-evident good.

- 20
- 21 5) From a Canadian-Christian-Ecclesial vantage point, we need to commit to a  
22 hermeneutic of the *gospel* of Jesus that is literally non-lethal. We need to promise  
23 each other that our biblical hermeneutics will not move us toward justifying us  
24 killing each other, not within nor beyond our own nation-state. Hermeneutical  
25 suspicion must restrain the justification of violence. We need to promise each other  
26 that we will exercise hermeneutical self-control when we feel the urge to justify  
27 our participation in such violent activities against each other. It is time for  
28 Christians to commit to stop killing fellow Christians. And it is time for Christians  
29 to stop training themselves and their young people to kill each other. And it is time  
30 to stop blessing the weapons, the technology, the people, and the logic that are  
31 used for killing. And it is time for Christians to stop paying in order to train each  
32 other to kill each other. It is time to stop using our sacred texts and traditions to  
33 justify initiating and participating in such actions. We need to stop some things  
34 within the Ecclesial Square so that our witness in the Public Square may have the  
35 integrity we seek. At the very least, we need to move from our habitual yes – but -  
36 thinking to a no – but - potential. And we need to do so with the integrity  
37 suggested by the *gospel* of peace. The time is now. We are here for such a time as  
38 this.
- 39
- 40 6) And in the name of obedience to the Prince of Peace, we dare not stop here. As we  
41 (CCC) move toward intentional inter-faith dialogue and cooperation, we need to  
42 offer these same commitments to those with whom we cooperate and propose to  
43 talk. Our integrity in dialogue will be measured by our capacity to also promise our  
44 partners that our gospel is non-lethal for them too. If we sit across the table from  
45 those of other faiths, saying that we want to cooperate with them and get to know  
46 them better, yet ultimately we are still willing to participate in killing them and

1 those within their houses of faith, our dialogue does not have the integrity that the  
2 *gospel* of Jesus Christ demands. We must be willing to shed the image of previous  
3 strategies for inter-faith interactions (e.g., the crusades and the conquest of the  
4 Americas). We cannot afford to enter processes of conversation unless we can  
5 unequivocally denounce and leave behind the violent strategies that have been part  
6 of our efforts up to this point. We must be able to assure the Islam Imam, the  
7 Jewish Rabbi, the Buddhist priest, the Native Canadian elder, and the Hindu guru  
8 that they and their people are safe in our company. What, after all, can inter-faith  
9 dialogue be without this foundational promise? Would we not prefer to have the  
10 same commitment from them?  
11  
12

### 13 **Conclusion:**

14  
15 I am fully aware that this presentation does not address everything. It does not address the  
16 full agenda that biblical *shalom* challenges us to. Neither does it address the immediate  
17 and urgent needs crying for attention. For example, it does not provide specific counsel for  
18 difficult and complex domestic and international questions (Rwanda, Darfur). I do not  
19 want to suggest that those are not important. My concern is that in order to more  
20 effectively address these urgent concerns in a new way, we need to get out of our habits in  
21 which we instinctively default to the millennia-old arguments that justify the use of  
22 violence in order to establish the peace we seek, i.e., the yes – but assumptions. It is  
23 possible and necessary to develop an instinct that has a different starting point. I am  
24 confident that if we do, the Holy Spirit working among us and the fruit of this work, while  
25 unpredictable, would be very positive and even amazing.  
26

27 I would venture to suggest that some results would indeed be predictable:  
28

- 29 1) Such commitments to each other would generate enormous public interest, and  
30 provide mountains of opportunities for positive public witness in the media and  
31 around the world.
- 32 2) Such commitments would force us to answer many questions that we are not now,  
33 but should be, asking. This would be healthy.
- 34 3) Such a public witness would attract many people, especially the disenchanted  
35 younger folks, back to the gospel and to the church.
- 36 4) Such a process would invigorate the church's commitment to biblical faithfulness,  
37 and reconstruct a part of the public Christian platform that now remains largely un-  
38 constructed.
- 39 5) Such a process would speak into issues of national and international political  
40 priorities, but from a vantage point seldom taken seriously now.

41  
42 The Canadian church is in a unique and historic space to speak about the gospel from this  
43 foundational, but largely forgotten, perspective. Christ is our peace, for such a time as this.  
44

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46

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