

The Second Coming Could Now Be the Time?

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One of the greatest differences between Christian and other views of Jesus stems from the fact that His life did not usher in the Messianic era of universal peace predicted in Isaiah 2:4: “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 any more.”

Far from beating our swords into plowshares, in the 20th century alone, well over 100 million people died of war and related violence. While non-Christians tend to view this carnage as proof that Jesus was not the Messiah, Christian theology sees a two-step process and looks to the Second Coming of Christ to complete the Messianic promise.

The theses of this essay are:

- The universal peace associated with the Second Coming must occur in the near future for humanity to survive;
- the Christian community is in a unique position to initiate that process;
- if Christianity succeeds in initiating that process, its Messianic theology will be proved; and
- the process by which the seemingly impossible dream of universal peace becomes a reality has precedents in Christian theology.

Necessity of Change

Ending war has been a goal of humanity for thousands of years, but realists have consigned this dream to the Utopian junk heap. History might seem to support the naysayers since both the League of Nations and the United Nations proved powerless to halt the ever-increasing carnage of war. But, two little noted changes make ending war imperative.

The first factor pushing us toward peace is that we have become too civilized to win wars, but not civilized enough to avoid them – clearly a recipe for disaster. Americans still tend to think in terms of World War II: We defeated Germany and Japan, occupied them, and turned those brutal nations into the civilized Germans and Japanese we know today. What we miss in applying this model to more recent conflicts is that we killed millions of innocent civilians in that process – a tactic that we are thankfully unwilling to employ today. While ethically commendable, hesitating to use force when innocent lives are at risk puts one at a significant military disadvantage when faced with adversaries who do not share this concern.

The second force for peace is the tremendous “success” of weapons development. The development of vast stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction has created an environment in which the dream of universal peace must become a reality if humanity is to survive. Every time

we succumb to the mentality of war, there is some chance it will escalate out of control into a global, nuclear holocaust.

President Kennedy estimated the odds of the Cuban Missile Crisis going nuclear as somewhere between one in three and even. In the same way, every small war is like pulling the trigger in a global version of Russian roulette. Kennedy's estimate is equivalent to having only two or three chambers in the gun. In such a game, pulling the trigger once is dangerous. But pulling it continually is certain death. Usually the gun has many more than two or three chambers, but that only changes the time frame, not the inevitable outcome. If humanity persists in the mentality that war is regrettable but unavoidable, it is not a question of if we will destroy ourselves, only when.

Attention is currently diverted from the threat of all-out nuclear war and focused on the war in Iraq, nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. But the problems are inextricably intertwined. As in the Cuban Missile Crisis or the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, small-scale acts of violence that escalate out of control are the most likely trigger for the next World War.

And, so long as war is regarded as a viable option, more and more nations will go nuclear. In the current environment, only by developing nuclear weapons can Iran and North Korea counter America's vastly superior conventional weaponry, and thereby gain more equal status in disputes where they now are at a great disadvantage. Further, both Iran and North Korea fear being attacked by us, possibly with nuclear weapons. While there is disagreement as to the factual basis of such fears, we have done little to allay them and often reinforced them.

Clarifying the connection between the small- and large-scale threats holds promise of eliminating both in a way that focusing on either alone does not. Nuclear disarmament is impossible so long as we fear conventional war, and the danger for small wars to go nuclear provides a powerful, new deterrent to all uses of violence – if it were recognized. If humanity understood that it had to choose between war and survival, there is hope, perhaps even certitude, that it would choose survival. Christians know that “Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52) What is new is that, now, that warning applies to humanity as a whole.

The Process of Change

In response to the above arguments, many have objected that ending war is impossible, and that it is a part of human nature. Yet ending slavery seemed impossible in 1787, when it was written into our Constitution. Women's suffrage was seen as even more laughable and the early abolitionist movement, which originally included that goal, had to put it aside out of fear that it would prolong slavery for decades longer than need be. (In the US, women's suffrage came almost 60 years later than the abolition of slavery.) Both of those “impossible” societal changes did occur, and anyone who now suggested bringing back slavery or taking away women's right to vote would be considered at least as crazy as the early abolitionists and suffragettes.

How do seemingly impossible dreams come true? While Christian theology has much to say about this that will be treated later, there is also a rational explanation. Everett Rogers' 1962 book “Diffusion of Innovations” provides an answer, now widely used in business marketing.

In the first stage of the process, few are willing to even consider the seemingly crazy, new approach. But a small group that Rogers calls “innovators” provide the vanguard. Because they are willing to consider a laughable idea, innovators are not usually the recognized leaders of society. Yet they are the true leaders. Adoption by just a few percent of the population creates an environment in which a much larger segment that Rogers calls “early adopters” feels safe entertaining the possibility of change. Several other groups follow these, until the idea permeates society and becomes “obvious.”

Pessimists are right in one sense: Immediate implementation of the new idea is impossible in the early phases of this process. But as more people begin to talk about it seriously, they change the environment, and what was previously impossible becomes possible.

The solution to our long-range national security lies not in electing new leaders, or in developing some new weapon system. This fits well with Christians’ beliefs that such false gods lead nowhere good, and that only by reaffirming their faith in the way Christ lived His life and met His death can they find everlasting life. What is new is that everlasting life now has both individual and societal meaning.

Why Christianity?

As a Jew, I would prefer to rally my own community to lead this transformation, but there are several reasons why Christians are in a unique position to be the innovators in bringing about a true, universal peace.

1. In Christian theology, Christ lives on in the body of His followers. Hence, if Christians were to play this key role, it would realize a two thousand year old dream, the Second Coming of Christ ushering in an era of universal peace. While this Second Coming differs from the classical picture, it is as attractive to the rational mind as to the soul. The critical role that each individual plays in this transformation is foretold by Luke 17:20-21: “And when He was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, He answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! For, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.”

2. Jesus was the ultimate activist-pacifist who commanded Peter to sheath his sword even though being taken to certain death. Although not widely recognized, Gandhi's non-violent resistance derives largely from Jesus' admonition to not resist evil (Matthew 5:38-39). To follow Christ, Christians need to be more like Gandhi and less like Crusaders. Jesus reserved the highest praise for those who work for peace: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

3. Christians constitute approximately 80% of the American population. It therefore would take only a small percentage embracing the true path of Christ to start the process of change. Unfortunately, too many Christians have strayed from their legacy and polls show that self-described American Christians support recent wars in greater proportion than the population as a whole. While this lapse is regrettable, it also contains a possible seed for success: If the

American Christian community were to make such a startling reversal, it could garner major media attention, increasing the visibility of the process and its chance of success.

4. The “Process of Change” by which the impossible becomes possible was described above in modern, business-oriented terms, but fits Christ’s parables likening the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed and leaven (Matthew 13:31-33). The difficulty that the rational mind has in understanding this mystical transformation can be overcome by remembering that “with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). Christians are also well schooled to understand that individual transformation is a necessary prerequisite to societal change.

5. Research [Dweck, *Mindset*, 2006] has shown that people will take on a challenge that is beyond their current potential only if they believe that their abilities can grow through hard work and practice. Where most people see an impossible task doomed to certain failure, these people see an opportunity to grow. To be in the vanguard of ending war, people need to see a vast store of untapped potential within the human race and not be afraid of voicing that belief, characteristics embodied by an important segment of the Christian community.

What Next?

Many elements within Christianity already are working for peace. Denominations such as the Quakers have Christ’s peace as a fundamental basis of their theology and work. Groups such as Pax Christi within the Roman Catholic Church are similarly oriented. But something more is needed as evidenced by the number of wars raging throughout the world.

This essay offers five new tools that might aid existing efforts. First, the argument that ending war is no longer merely desirable, but necessary for human survival is not generally recognized and should be a powerful lever. Many people believe that war is an unchangeable part of human nature. In that view, the mentality of war is like an immovable object. But, in that same analogy, the survival drive is an irresistible force. When the immovable object meets the irresistible force, there is hope that the latter will win out.

A second tool is the Process of Change by which the impossible becomes possible. While miracles are nothing new to Christian thought, there is a tendency to assume they only happened in ancient times. By providing a rational explanation for how a modern day miracle could occur, this tool might prove valuable in encouraging people to embrace a possibility they would otherwise reject as fantastic and unrealistic.

The third tool is congruity. A peace group that makes verbal war on the military, a national leader, or anyone else, is not a peace group. And it is certainly not Christian. “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matthew 7:1), “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Matthew 7:3)

The fourth and final tool offered here is a chance for individual Christians to not only witness, but to participate in, the Second Coming of Christ.

The number of Christians for whom Christ's peace is a constant goal in their lives and the even larger number for whom it plays some part constitute a critical nucleus for this effort. At first their position on the periphery of Christianity might seem to be a handicap. But that picture changes radically when viewed from the perspective of Rogers' Process of Change: It is rarely the acknowledged leaders of a group who first embrace radically new ideas. True leaders tend to come from the periphery, just as Jesus was not part of either the religious or political hierarchy of His time.

To be effective, some coordination is needed to create a critical mass out of the existing, dispersed Christian peace efforts. This coordination needs to be unobtrusive enough that groups with widely divergent approaches and theologies can participate, yet strong enough to be perceived as cohesive and powerful.

These conflicting forces can best be balanced by posing the goal of universal peace at the highest possible level, in Christian terms "Christ's peace." This bypasses any impression of partisanship or politics, and is in keeping with Jesus' approach. Thus, during events linked to the coordinated effort, no mention would be made of any particular war (e.g., Iraq) or politically divisive approach (e.g., the UN). Churches would, of course, be free to continue to include their positions in events not affiliated with the coordinated activity, but would keep the dialog at the highest level during coordinated events.

One possible series of coordinated events would be for affiliated churches to commit to having one sermon per quarter on the imperative to finally realize Christ's peace. Media coverage and societal impact would be maximized by having all these sermons occur on the same day each quarter and using modern public relations methods to get that message into the mass media and the public's consciousness.

Use of the Internet can greatly speed up the coordination process. Many ministers already make use of on-line sermon services to provide ideas for their Sunday sermons. Providing a free, on-line sermon exchange for coordinated events would facilitate both action and cohesiveness.

An effective, coordinated effort needs to work at two levels. At the spiritual level, it needs to appeal to the highest ideals of Christianity. At a practical level, it needs to assemble a team of dedicated volunteers, skilled in modern mass communications, so that the spiritual message reaches the widest possible audience. Given the number of people who find their workday lives lacking in meaning, hopefully assembling such a team will not be too a difficult task.

War threatens to turn God's creation into a wasteland and to destroy His children. The threat also holds a promise, calling out for the transformation promised in Christianity by the Resurrection. Life can overcome death when we put our trust in God.

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you. Not as the world giveth, give I unto you." (John 14.27) Christians have that gift to give to the world. But it must be claimed before it can be given. In Christian theology, Christ's First Coming laid the groundwork. Are today's Christians up to their part in helping fulfill the promise for which He died on the cross? For the sake of the world, I fervently hope so.