

**Historical Disciples Positions on War and Peace**  
**Based on reflections by Bruce Ervin, Craig Watts and Newell Williams**  
**A Faithful Conversation for Regions and Congregations**

**Introductory Remarks** (3-5 minutes)

1. Resource person introduces self (name, home church, region, etc.)
2. Concept of Faithful Conversations is explained in resource person's own words (see overview of process for further information)
3. Topic and format of this particular Faithful Conversation is briefly introduced
4. An opening prayer is offered

**Opening Exercise** (5 minutes)

1. Participants divide themselves into small groups of about 6 members
2. Small group members introduce themselves (name, home church)
3. Sharing within small groups: Name a place (e.g. within your church or home) where you feel especially peaceful, and why.

**Part 1: 1801-1865** (*Resource person can read, or present in his/her own words*)

The era which gave birth to the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement was a time of social ferment and culture building. Waves of revivalism and social reform swept across the young country. Many Christians believed that the kingdom of Christ would soon be established on earth and that the United States would play a leading role in the coming of the kingdom if she was spiritually purified. Revivals would purify individuals, and the plethora of reform societies which the revivals spawned would purify the nation.

Barton W. Stone and other early Disciples provided leadership for this millennial mission. We think of Stone as the leader of the great Cane Ridge Revival of 1801 but we forget that he was also a pacifist and an abolitionist. As early as 1819 this social reformer led his congregation in removing the slave balcony from the Cane Ridge church. They believed that Africans forced into bondage were children of God and should not be separated from other worshipers.

Stone's position on war changed over the course of his ministry. We can chart these changes by noting statements related to war that appear in his monthly journal, the *Christian Messenger*. Stone was in full sympathy with the peace movement that emerged in the United States following the War of 1812. Most members of this movement distinguished between the use of force in aggression and defence, opposing only the use of force in aggression. This was Stone's position for most of his ministry.

But in 1838, "ultraists" within the peace movement, led by Henry Clark Wright and William Lloyd Garrison, formed a Non-Resistance Society to oppose the use of force even in self-defence. Wright and Garrison argued that the practice of non-resistance would usher in Christ's reign on earth. Wright and Garrison were not part of the Restoration Movement, but Stone appears to have been influenced by their radical views.

In a dialogue, published in 1842, Stone addressed the question of whether Christians should go to war. The brother representing Stone's views stated that "Nothing appears so repugnant to the kingdom of heaven as war." But Stone still seemed to stop short of eschewing war in every situation. By July of 1844, however, he had become an advocate of non-resistance. In a lecture on the Sermon on the Mount, he noted that non-

resistance of "an evil or injurious person" was the meaning of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:39: "But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Stone advised that by observing this teaching, "you may overcome the injurious person, and bring him to submission to the truth." Christ, he proposed, had set the example. "A nation professing Christianity, yet teaching, learning and practicing the arts of war," he warned, "cannot be the kingdom of Christ, nor do they live in obedience to the laws of Christ...the government is anti-christian, and must reap the fruits of their infidelity at some future day."

How can we explain the change in Stone's views from a defense of resistance to non-resistance? It appears to be related to his opposition to slavery and his growing disappointment with the failure of the American government to end the institution. In the April 1835 issue of the *Christian Messenger*, Stone had cast his lot in favor of immediate abolition, the position advocated by Garrison, who was one of the most radical of the white abolitionists. In 1842, Stone followed Garrison and other radical abolitionists in calling on Christians to prepare for Christ's coming to establish a millennium of justice and peace upon the earth by withdrawing from participation in civil governments.

Why withdraw from civil governments? Because civil governments would not establish justice; on the contrary, civil governments supported slavery. Christians should prepare for Christ's coming by living as if Christ had already come. This would mean following his ways of peace and justice. War, even a defensive war, was contrary to the ways of Christ and, like slavery, Stone now believed, must be immediately abolished.

Stone was not alone in these convictions among leaders of the Restoration Movement. By 1848 Alexander Campbell had also become a pacifist, declaring,

*"War is not now, nor was it ever, a process of justice...It is a violent outrage of the strong upon the weak...a Christian people can in no way whatever countenance a war as a proper means of redressing wrongs...or of settling controversies among nations."*

Campbell, however, was never as outspoken about slavery as was Stone. While the sage of Bethany called himself anti-slavery and said that slavery must eventually end, he refused to consider slaveholding essentially immoral. Other Restoration Movement leaders were more forthright in their anti-slavery convictions. Educators such as Ovid Butler and James A. Garfield nurtured a new generation of reformers in their abolitionist views through such institutions as Butler University and Hiram College. Evangelist Pardee Butler went to Kansas in 1854 both to establish new congregations and to organize anti-slavery voters so that Kansas might enter the Union as a free state. And pacifists such as Benjamin Franklin and David Lipscomb used both pulpit and journal to proclaim that God wills an immediate abolition of war from the face of the earth.

The outbreak of Civil War in 1861, however, put these abolitionist and pacifist views in conflict. Garfield organized many of his students into the 42<sup>nd</sup> Ohio Infantry and marched them off to war. Indeed, northern Disciples were generally very supportive of the Union cause in the Civil War. In 1863, the American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS), meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio, without any Southern members present, resolved:

*“That we tender our sympathies to our brave soldiers in the fields, who are defending us from the attempts of armed traitors to overthrow our Government, and also to those bereaved and rendered desolate by the ravages of war.”*

Such actions were a significant factor in the separation of the Churches of Christ from the Disciples of Christ. Churches of Christ, located primarily in the South, were led initially by pacifists such as Phillip Fall and Tobert Fanning who lived in middle Tennessee. They had refused to support either the North or the South during the Civil War. Following the war, they rejected any association with the ACMS, which they viewed as having endorsed war.

### **First Conversation Period**

1. Resource person pauses and asks for questions
2. Small groups are reconvened for conversation around these questions:
  - a. Consider the following quote (resource person will have just handed out one copy to each small group):

*“Give me the money that's been spent in wars and I will clear up every acre of land in the world that ought to be cleared, drain every marsh, subdue every desert, fertilize every mountain and hill, and convert the whole earth into a continuous series of fruitful fields, verdant meadows, beautiful villas, hamlets, towns, cities, standing along smooth and comfortable highways and canals, or in the midst of luxuriant and fruitful orchards, vineyards, and gardens, full of fruits and flowers, redolent with all that pleases the eye and regales the senses of man. I would found, furnish, and endow as many schools, academies, and colleges as would educate the whole human race, would build meeting houses, public halls, lyceums, and furnish them with libraries adequate to the wants of a thousand millions of human beings.”*

Each small group to divide in half and debate the quote. Imagine that a bill to abolish war and divert monies to these peacetime pursuits has been introduced in Congress in the 1801-1865 period. Half of group should debate for the proposal and half against it. Try to use both biblical and economic arguments to support your position. At end of first conversation period, source of quote is revealed to be Alexander Campbell.

- b. You are attending the 1863 meeting of the American Christian Missionary Society. How would you vote on the resolution supporting the Union war effort?
  - What biblical or moral arguments would you use to support your position?
  - Consider how your vote might be viewed in your 1863 home church or by members of the Stone/Campbell Movement in the South following the war.
  - Would those possible impacts influence how you might vote? Why or why not?

3. Resource person asks for rapid fire reports from groups (one quick observation per group)

### **Part 2: 1914 – 1945** (See note at beginning of Part 1)

World War I began in Europe in 1914. On one side were the Central European Powers and on the other the Allied Powers. At first, the United States appeared determined to remain neutral. Among Disciples, the wisdom of neutrality was reinforced by the views of Peter Ainslie. Continuing in the pacifist tradition of Stone and Campbell, Ainslie (a Disciples pastor and ecumenical leader) said that he would refuse to support

this war or any war, and that he was prepared to go to prison for his refusal to support American participation in the European conflict.

But others in the United States had different views. American merchants saw war as an opportunity to increase sales. As a result, two parties came to exist: one calling for neutrality and pacifism, the other for economic or trade support of the Allied Powers.

How did the United States become militarily involved? Preachers and the press, including such leading Disciples as Burriss Jenkins and Charles Clayton Morrison, convinced the public that the war was a crusade “to make the world safe for democracy.” This idea flowed from the Social Gospel conviction that through social reforms and other forms of “muscular Christianity,” the kingdom of God (or at least something close to it) could be achieved. Even Presbyterian Harry Emerson Fosdick, a rising star among progressive preachers, declared that pacifism was “unchristian.”

Once the United States entered the war in 1917, preachers actively supported the conflict. Ministers used sermon outlines and illustrations provided by the War Department. A famous Congregationalist preacher, Newell Dwight Hillis, was the author of widely repeated atrocity stories. Ministers also delivered “service flags” to families that had sent members to war.

When the war ended in November 1918, an unexpected result was a decline in the growth rate of American Protestantism. As efforts to create a lasting peace faltered, some Americans came to view the so-called crusade as just another European war. Why, they asked, had America become involved? The newspapers claimed that American business interests had been a factor. The Nye Commission, appointed by Congress, reported that munitions makers had lobbied to prolong the war. Newell Dwight Hillis admitted that the atrocity stories he had written during the War were fiction!

Disillusionment with America, its religious leaders, and with the whole idea of trying to make the world a better place became a feature of American culture. In particular, many of the privileged, college-educated young people of the 1920s rejected what they perceived to be the “Puritan” values of their parents, which they identified with the recent war. Among those values was church membership.

Another result of the church’s support of America’s participation in World War I was a new definition of patriotism. A leading voice in the development of this definition was a Disciples minister, Kirby Page, who in 1923 published *War: Its Causes, Consequences, and Cure*. Fosdick, who had championed America’s participation in the war, now declared in the foreword, “When the Great War broke, the churches were unprepared to take a well-considered Christian attitude. We, too, had been hypnotized by nationalism, had taken patriotism at its current values and had understood it in its ordinary meanings.” Henceforth, many Christians would be uncomfortable with unrestrained patriotism and would identify true “Americanism” with the right to criticize one’s nation.

For the next decade and a half, Disciples were caught-up in the anti-war zeal that took hold of much of the nation. Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the *Christian Century*, joined the ranks of pacifists. The Disciples Peace Fellowship was founded. And the 1936 Disciples International Convention declared:

*“We believe war to be morally and ethically wrong and a direct contradiction to the teachings of Jesus Christ. We therefore disassociate ourselves from the war system and serve notice...that we will not support future wars, nor will we...permit our co-operative agencies to be used either directly or indirectly for such purposes.”*

With the outbreak of yet another war in Europe in 1939, Disciples were determined that they would not be seduced into supporting another bloody crusade.

All of this suddenly changed with the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Disciples were quickly supportive of America’s entry into World War II, with Morrison, once again re-born as a cheerleader for war, using the pages of his journal to show Disciples the way. Yet a few voices within the Disciples Brotherhood continued to proclaim pacifism as the way of Jesus. Harold Fey, who would eventually succeed Morrison as editor of the Christian Century, nearly resigned from the journal to protest his boss’s amazing conversion. And a newly ordained pastor named T.J. Liggett took to his pulpit a week after Pearl Harbor and told his parishioners that they must not hate the Japanese. As well, a small number of Disciples became conscientious objectors and performed alternative service for the nation rather than violate their consciences and bear arms.

### **Second Conversation Period**

1. Resource person pauses and asks for questions
2. Small groups are reconvened for conversation around these questions:
  - a. Does it surprise you that American Christians, including former pacifists, were so quick to embrace war in both 1917 and 1941? Why do you suppose they did it?
  - b. Is there ever a time when Christians are called to oppose the laws or the overwhelming public opinion of their nation?
    - On what basis might a Christian take such a stand?
    - Hint: Don’t be afraid to quote scripture!
3. Resource person asks for rapid fire reports from groups

### **Part 3: The Vietnam Era** *(see note at beginning of Part 1)*

In the 1960s, the United States was involved in a war in Vietnam that was increasingly viewed on college and university campuses not as a war to defend freedom, but as an exercise of U.S. imperialism against the will of the Vietnamese people.

How did Disciples respond? In 1966, the International Convention approved a series of resolutions supporting the legal protection of conscientious objectors to a particular war. A year later, after Disciple military chaplain E. Tipton Carroll, Jr. argued that such a position undermined young men who were defending their country, the Convention reversed the previous Convention’s decision. In 1968, the first General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) reversed the 1967 Convention’s decision by a substantial majority. Delegates also affirmed their support of the men and women serving in the armed forces and pledged to continue to support them regardless of the political climate at home and the military policies of the U.S. government.

Though Disciples never officially opposed the Vietnam War, there was considerable opposition to the war within the denomination. The 1969 General Assembly witnessed the name of every American who had been killed in Vietnam being read quietly during business sessions. The 1973 General Assembly struggled mightily

with the question of granting amnesty to draft registers. The 1975 Assembly adopted a resolution expressing relief at the end of the Indochina War and urging the U.S. government to quickly establish relations with the new communist governments of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Throughout this era, Disciples Peace Fellowship and Disciples for Mission and Renewal were a very vocal presence on the floor of the General Assembly, as Disciples anti-war activists such as Barton Hunter, Charles Bayer and Barbara Fuller provided able leadership to the progressive wing of the church.

### **Third Conversation Period**

1. Resource person pauses and asks for questions
2. Small groups are reconvened for conversation around these questions:
  - a. The Vietnam Era was a very divisive time among Americans and among Disciples. What were some of the factors which contributed to such divisiveness?
  - b. Are there issues that are so important within the church that they should be addressed even at the risk of causing divisions, or should unity be valued at all costs? Why or why not? Participants may want to point to specific examples or tell stories out of their own experience.
3. Resource person asks for rapid fire reports from groups

#### ***Notes to the leader:***

1. *Arrange for an observer/recorder to take notes on entire Faithful Conversations session, including key points shared in small groups and how material can be used or modified going forward. Notes should be shared with Faithful Conversations Steering Committee. Observer/recorder should circulate among small groups.*
2. *During small group time, leader should circulate among groups, pausing to listen and answering questions. Let groups know that leader and recorder/observer will circulate.*
3. *Pass out questions at the beginning of first break out session, or post them. Use of newsprint or PowerPoint may be helpful.*
4. *Encourage participants to lead a Faithful Conversation in their congregations. Pass out resource material or tell folks where they can find these materials on line.*
5. *End: Observer shares key points, leader thanks everyone for participating and prays.*