



History: Treaties and Virtues

What if history explored justice, forgiveness and peace through a treaty?

Dwayne taught high-school history and wanted students to consider the Reconstruction Era that followed the Civil War in terms of justice, forgiveness, and peace as understood in biblical terms.

"I started with a presentation that explained a Christian understanding of forgiveness justice and peace. I gave them the following summary:

- Justice is often seen as the opposite of forgiveness and love, but they relate closely in the Bible. Justice is about putting things right and delivering from oppression; it is a way of showing love in some situations. Someone can be forgiven, but justice may still be required.
- Forgiveness is canceling an acknowledged 'debt' caused by wrong and mending a fractured relationship; as such it is an aspect of love. Forgiveness can be an act of will, not just an emotion, and repentance is usually required by the wrongdoer.
- Peace is more than lack of conflict; it is when relationships are right at a deep level, when people and situations are flourishing, healthy, and complete.

"We went on to examine the results of Reconstruction using the following prompts:

- What needed to be forgiven?
- Justice for whom?
- Who 'won' under the principles President Lincoln enunciated in his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865 ('with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right')?
- How did this compare with the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution? The Civil Rights Act of 1865? The Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and

1868? The Impeachment of President Johnson?

- How might biblical principles be relevant?
- What sort of peace could have been created?

“At the end I gave time for students to reflect on how things may have been different if other choices had been made. I showed some post-war images while they did this.”

What's going on here?

Dwayne saw history as an appropriate context for exploring the role of forgiveness, justice, and peace and how that may have altered the outcome for many communities.

He engaged students by having them discuss questions that focused on values and by encouraging them to reflect on how history might have been different had other choices been made.

He reshaped his practice by framing the lesson with specific values and changing his introduction to focus on them. He followed this through by changing his discussion questions to be in line with his new emphasis.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

The Bible sees forgiveness as a response to being forgiven by God. It is an aspect of love which does not let sin destroy a relationship forever; a relationship can be rebuilt with repentance and forgiveness. Peace, justice, and forgiveness are all hopeful virtues that point to healing and restoration and have social implications. They also are difficult to practice, and faith in God and the help of the Holy Spirit are needed.

What difference does it make?

Stopping to consider how the past might have been different can raise students' awareness of the importance of choices and that things do not have to take an inevitable course. This lesson also encourages students to see how faith connects with important public decisions and policies.

Where do we go from here?

Dwayne could select other appropriate values to frame lessons. He could use values such as compassion and humility to assess people who made a difference in history.

Digging deeper

God calls people to follow "justice and only justice" ([Deuteronomy 16:20](#)). God's justice shows itself in acting on behalf of the powerless (Psalm 72, 7, 12), often represented as the orphan, the widow, and the stranger—those with no one to defend them and who often are treated unfairly. God expects his people to make justice and redressing wrongs their aim ([Isaiah 1:13-17](#)). Saint Augustine said, "Charity is no substitute for justice withheld."

The Bible describes God as a God of justice, and the prophet Amos railed against the injustices of his day, in which the vulnerable were oppressed and the rich just got richer. He called for justice to roll like a river ([Amos 2:24](#)). People seem to have an innate sense of justice and are rightly outraged at the injustice they see in the world ([Malachi 2:17](#)).

Forgiveness was modeled by Christ, who forgave his enemies ([Luke 23:24](#)). Asking God for forgiveness should result in forgiveness of others ([Matthew 6:14-15](#); [Colossians 3:13](#)). Forgiveness is not just a feeling; as Corrie Ten Boom once said, "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."

Biblical peace is about wholeness and things being right in our relationships, in our bodies, minds, and world. It is positive peace, not just a lack of conflict. That experience of the peace of God is a foretaste of his peace to come ([John 14:27](#)). Having peace and hope does not mean that life will be easy.

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