

Shalom: An Intercultural Objective

Introduction

Peace is a mysterious word with varied meanings, many of them elusive or seemingly unattainable. Is peace simply the absence of war, is it the lack of conflict, or is it something more? Theorists have defined three levels of peace: minimal, moderate and optimal. Minimal peace is the nonexistence of conflict between various parties. Moderate peace develops when those who are experiencing conflict are willing to compromise on their own. Optimal peace occurs when both parties value the other's goals and objectives as highly as their own. For the Christian disciple, however, there is a fourth degree of peace, that of Shalom.

Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace, can be defined as not only the absence of war, coupled with concern for the goals of another, but goes on to include justice, especially for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. It is this type of peace to which the Community of Christ has been called, for "...in their welfare resides [our] welfare" (D&C 163: 4a)

Roadblocks along the Path to Shalom

If Shalom is the ideal, why then have we found it so difficult to effectuate? There are many roadblocks along the pathway to Shalom. First among them is the assumption of similarities among various cultures of the world. Many assume that because there are basic likenesses between all people of the world, communication should be equally similar. However, the simple fact that people speak different languages and come from different cultures is the very basis of the differences among peoples of the earth and, likewise, the reason for dissimilarities among peoples. We would do well to recognize

that there are relatively few similarities among the people of various cultural groups of the Earth and we should, therefore, seek to understand the unique characteristics of each culture.

This language difference is another roadblock along the pathway toward the development of true Shalom. There are many differences in the way people from various cultures view language, between speaking and silence and, likewise, between verbal and non-verbal communication. These differences form the basis for the language barriers. Beyond simply the spoken language of another culture, the meaning behind the words is equally important. To truly understand another culture, we must become interpreters, ones who understand the meaning behind words, rather than simple translators, ones who can only speak the language of another culture without understanding the true, intended meaning of the spoken words.

Third, preconceptions and stereotypes affect our ability to effectively seek Shalom with all cultures. If we are to seek the Shalom, we must also seek to respect and integrate cultural differences and seek to develop intercultural sensitivity and awareness. It is this sense of intercultural connectedness that must be fostered if we are to overcome the preconceptions and stereotypes that exist.

Finally, many have a tendency to evaluate what others say and do from their own context rather than attempting to interpret the meaning of words and actions from the viewpoint of the other. Christians need to develop the capacity to be nonjudgmental. Though we should not retreat from our own sense of right and wrong we would do well to look and listen emphatically to those from other cultures.

Overcoming the Roadblocks

With so many obstacles along the pathway toward peace and justice the challenge may seem daunting. However, if we are to foster Shalom, these obstacles must be overcome. The basic answer to overcoming these obstacles is to develop a sense of community with the various cultures of the world and to strive for empathy with those cultures. When we seek to understand another from the place of the other, barriers are broken down and roadblocks are removed. It is then that Shalom can be pursued.

Images of peace and justice must also be a part of our lexicon. We must develop a language of peace and communicate that language to all. This peace communication is to be spoken within like cultural groups and between varied cultural groups.

Conclusion

Peace is more than an abstract concept that is to be pursued only by idealistic dreamers. Though there are many obstacles along the pathway to Shalom, the way is not impassable. Rather, through empathetic thought characterized by peace communication, we can seek to foster Shalom in relationships with person from other cultures, between other people groups, and throughout the world.

Peace and justice must be pursued by the followers of Jesus Christ. In so doing, the poor will find comfort, the widow will find support, the orphan will find hope, the stranger will find hospitality and communities and cultures can repair damaged relationships with each other. It is not a utopia that is unattainable, rather, true Shalom can be achieved by individuals and cultures that embrace the challenges and reap the rewards of embodying God's Shalom.