



The Christian and peace. Address by rev. Franklin Graham, President of Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, at International Conference on Religion and Peace (Moscow, 29 October, 2015)

Your Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion, Respected Participants in the International Forum on Religion and Peace, Honorable Officials of the Russian Federation and the City of Moscow, and Distinguished Guests and Observers!

I am very grateful to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion for their kindness in inviting me to speak to this distinguished gathering of international religious leaders on the subject of peace. I cannot help but recall that 33 years ago - in 1982 - His Holiness Patriarch Pimen extended a similar invitation to my father, the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham, to speak here at another conference on world peace sponsored by the Russian Orthodox Church. It was the height of the Cold War, and many in my own country — including some of our highest officials — strongly urged him not to come. However, my father was convinced God had called him to raise his voice against the dangers of nuclear and biochemical weapons of mass destruction. I believe that conference led eventually to a new era of peace and understanding. The issues we face today may be different, but I pray that this gathering may have a similar impact.

I cannot help but note also, Your Eminence, that my father returned here in 1988 to join in celebrating the 1000th anniversary of the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Rus, and the founding of the Russian Orthodox Church. I was deeply moved, Your Eminence, when I learned that this year - 2015 - marks the 1000th anniversary of the death of Prince Vladimir. On behalf of my father and my fellow believers in the United States, I extend to you our most respectful congratulations on this historic occasion.

In many ways the world has changed much since my father spoke here in 1982. Tragically, however, in other ways our world has not changed. Peace still eludes us, and every year terrorism and war kill countless thousands and disrupt the lives of millions. Ukraine, South Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, The Philippines - the list is almost endless. I agree with Patriarch Kirill's statement that «Only the devil can celebrate when brothers come into conflict, destroying each other and inflicting wounds on each other»[1].

What is the problem? Do wars rage simply because of economic disparity, or ethnic differences, or a lust for revenge, or any of a hundred other reasons we could list? These certainly can cause conflicts

and wars. But as a Christian I am convinced the problem is much deeper. The real issue we face is not just economic or ethnic or political. The real issue is moral and spiritual in nature, and it comes from the evil within our own hearts and minds. Jesus said, «For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come - sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly»[2]. Metropolitan Hilarion echoed this truth in a recent television interview: «All wars begin in people's minds.... Violence, people's deaths and their suffering - all this fermented first in the minds of those whom Dostoyevsky called 'demons' - and only after that was it put into action»[3].

Why are we this way? The Bible - which Christians believe is God's written Word - says that the reason we are this way is because we have rebelled against God. God created us, and He loves us and has told us how we ought to live. Instead of loving God and obeying Him, however, we have rebelled against Him, and we live only for ourselves. We are alienated from God, and because we are alienated from Him, we also are alienated from each other. The Bible calls this rebellion "sin", which is like a deadly cancer invading our souls, and filling us with hate and anger and jealousy and greed. As Patriarch Kirill said in his annual greeting last Christmas, «At the bottom of all conflict, hatred, and division is sin»[4].

Is there any solution? Must we always be this way - or can our hearts be changed, so we no longer will be ruled by hate but by love?

The ultimate solution will not be found through a renewed arms race, or diplomacy, or legislation, or any other human effort. Instead, the ultimate solution must take place within our own souls. Our greatest need is to be reconciled to God, for only then can our hearts be changed, and only then can we truly be reconciled to each other. In other words, our greatest need is to be at peace with God, and at peace with ourselves, and at peace with others.

But is this possible? As a Christian I am convinced the answer is Yes! We can be changed, the Bible says, because of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us. We cannot erase the stain and corruption of sin from our hearts by our own efforts. Only God can forgive us and cleanse us and change us - and He made this possible by coming down from Heaven in the person of Jesus Christ (Jn. 3: 16). Christ, who was God in human flesh, became the final and complete sacrifice for our sins by His death on the cross, and by His resurrection from the dead He offers us hope - hope for our lives right now, and hope for life with Him in Heaven forever. Jesus said: «I am the way and the truth and the life» (Jn. 14: 6). He also gives us His Holy Spirit to change us from within, and to restrain the forces of evil in the world.

I have spoken to you today as a Christian, although I know this International Forum also includes representative from other religions. However, we are not here today to debate our differences, but to affirm what we have in common: a commitment to peace.

What can each of us do within our own spheres of influence to advance the cause of peace? Let me suggest three ways.

First, let us firmly reject all who undertake violence and war in the name of religion. I am not a pacifist; I believe peoples and nations have a right to defend themselves against those who seek their destruction. But religion must never be used as an excuse for violence, terrorism, genocide or war. God is for good, not evil; God is for life, not death. Let us affirm this in every way we possibly can.

Second, let us urge the leaders of the world to give priority to the search for peace. I agree with what my father said here in 1982: «Let us call the nations and the leaders of our world to repentance.... No nation, large or small, is exempt from blame for the present state of international affairs»^[5]. Political leaders face problems that are often very complex, and I believe those of us who are religious leaders must pray for them. At the same time, let us urge our leaders to make peace their most basic priority.

Third, let us do everything we can to alleviate the suffering caused by war and civil strife. During his visit to our headquarters in the United States last year, His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion made me aware of the widespread suffering caused by the conflict in Ukraine. As a result, we have been able to work with the Russian Orthodox Church to supply humanitarian assistance to many who have been displaced by the fighting in that region. The Bible says, «Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people»^[6].

Again, Your Eminence, thank you for your gracious invitation to be here this morning. May God's blessings be upon you, and upon all who sincerely seek to serve the Living God in the cause of peace.

^[1] Transcript, "Patriarch Kirill Addresses the Fullness of the Russian Orthodox Church", June 17, 2014.

^[2] Mark 7:21-22

^[3] Transcript, "Metropolitan Hilarion: all wars begin in people's minds", Vesti-24 TV, Network, September 23, 2014.

^[4] Transcript, "Christmas Message of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus Kirill", January 5, 2015.

^[5] Billy Graham, Just As I Am, second edition, p. 505.

