

**Why We Fight: The Roots of War and the Paths to Peace**  
Christopher Blattman. 2022. Viking Press. ISBN 978-1-984-88157-1

*Review by Jeffrey R. Bloem*

Matthew's Beatitudes include the well-known phrase, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). But how do we most effectively make peace on earth?

In his first book, Christopher Blattman—a well-known development economist, University of Chicago Professor, and policy blogger—presents, distills, and summarizes several decades of research in economics, political science, psychology, biology, sociology, and practical experience about peacemaking in a world that often seems all too violent. Blattman begins by turning the casual observation that the world is violent and full of conflict on its head. Many believe that war is easy and peace is hard, but Blattman argues that fighting is hard and getting to peace is easier than we often tend to think.

To see why this is the case, in chapter one entitled, "Why We Don't Fight," Blattman leverages an explanation that should be well understood among economists: selection bias. Our casual observations about the relative frequency of war and peace are biased by the fact that we often do not observe instances where bitter rivals or enemies that could fight each other strike a deal. Most of the time enemies prefer to loathe one another in peace. We mostly observe the newsworthy and attention-grabbing acts of war and tend to ignore peaceful acts of banal compromise.

To illustrate this point Blattman retells the origins of Colombia's "Billiards War." It started in a prison holding local drug peddlers outside of Medellín. Nobody really remembers how it started, but a game of billiards in the prison ended in bitter arguing and violence. The conflict grew and eventually spilled outside of the prison. Two rival gangs, representing each side of the dispute, began to mobilize alliances with other gangs in the city. Everyone in Medellín braced for war, but the "Billiards War" never made an appearance in the global news cycle and will likely never appear in a history book.

Understanding that peaceful compromise is the rule and violence or war is the exception is important for understanding

the strategic benefits of peace and the factors that disrupt this strategy that can lead to violence. The rival gangs in Medellín, Colombia hold a strategic incentive to maintain peace, even if they dislike each other. They may want to control the other's territory, but fighting for control is costly and the benefit is uncertain. It is costly not only in terms of potential loss of life, but also financially. Gangs in Medellín sell local staples such as milk, eggs, and arepas; this business suffers during times of conflict. This creates a range of compromises that each rival gang prefers over fighting. In the case of the "Billiards War" one rival gang gave up some territory to the other in a tense but peaceful compromise.

Blattman distills five reasons for war, which each account for the next five chapters of the book. This distillation of the logic of war in a world with strong incentives for peace is the backbone of the book. I will, briefly review the key details for each reason, but this seems like a good moment to emphasize that interested readers should read Blattman's book itself.

1. *Unchecked interests.* The strategic calculation motivating peace relies on the relatively high costs of war to incentivize peace. This incentive for peace breaks down when rulers, or the people who decide whether or not to go to war, are not accountable to the people who bear the brunt of the costs of war—when their interests are not held in check.
2. *Intangible incentives.* On the other side of the calculation, sometimes the benefits of fighting include something intangible—like vengeance, glory, or dominance. In such cases, the incentives for peace are overcome by these intangible incentives even in the face of enormous costs.
3. *Uncertainty.* So far the costs and benefits governing strategic calculations have been certain, but this need not always represent reality. Enemies may not know the true size or strength of each other, and this uncertainty can lead to mistaken judgments and failed bargains.
4. *Commitment problems.* Negotiations leading to either war or peace are not static games; they are repeated games between players with dynamic and sporadic interests. This environment makes commitment challenging and although both sides may prefer peace, they both know that neither can credibly commit to peace in the future.

5. *Misperceptions*. Strategic calculations are not performed by unemotional computers, but by humans. This can constrain compromises because humans can be overconfident, biased, mistaken, naïve, or hold any other form of misperception about the world around them.

These five reasons for war are not the making of some new theory. Rather, they are “a way to organize the huge number of theories and schools of thought” already discussed and debated by scholars and practitioners over the past several decades (167). Although the persistence of any one of these reasons may not be enough to lead to all out war, their presence narrows the range of possible compromises and makes war more likely. Throughout the book Blattman repeats an analogy of a talented fighter pilot—a “flying ace” as he writes—flying a plane through a narrow canyon. On page 80, Blattman, introduces the analogy:

“ ... I want you to imagine a flying ace [...] evading enemy fire. In open skies he can dive and swerve at will. Should he take bullets to the wings and fuselage, it will be damaging, but probably not fatal. Chance events, like a lightning storm or gusts of wind, are troublesome, but he'll steer through them, for his craft is still solid.

Now suppose the ace navigates more treacherous terrain. He is piloting his craft through a narrow canyon. Now it's more difficult to dodge fire. Damage to the craft that, in open skies, would pose little worry now imperils the pilot. A sudden wind could crash the plane into the sheer walls. It's a fragile state.

This is what it means for the bargaining range to narrow. It changes the landscape a society must navigate.”

The second half of the book presents a variety of paths to peace, some of which show more promise than others. One path is interdependence. This includes both economic and social interdependence and the logic is simple. If your well-being is dependent on the well-being of a potential foe, then conflict and war are less likely. Another path is checks and balances. This follows directly from the first reason for war:

unchecked interests. Leaders who must answer to those who bear the costs of fighting are less likely to lead their people into war. Yet another path is rules and enforcement. If uncertainty and commitment problems make war more likely, then clearly defined rules with methods and means to enforce those rules reduce the possibility of fighting. This section concludes with of possible paths to peace—such as broad and blunt economic sanctions—that, despite their popularity, may not be as effective as some hope.

Blattman concludes by acknowledging that war—and other such “wicked” social problems—is “an eternal human struggle” (275). Many readers of this journal will likely agree and attribute these social problems to the presence of sin in our world. This reality can inspire many different reactions, such as an emotional response, intellectual engagement but emotional detachment, and perhaps even hopelessness. Blattman empathizes with these responses, but advocates for a slight reframing. Rather than strive for world peace, work instead for a slightly more peaceful world. Blattman then lays out his ten commandments of peacemaking, which, like the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament are simple yet powerful. These commandments, which I will not reproduce in this review, aim to encourage readers to take on an approach that aims to learn from trial-and-error in our peacemaking work. We find the path to a slightly more peaceful world by pursuing many paths, failing, learning, and trying again. Some may correctly see Blattman’s view hear as similar to Karl Popper’s view of knowledge progressing only through the repeated testing and falsification of ideas.

The caricature Blattman presents, of a patient and diligent engineer for a better world who looks to learn from failure, seems to align well with Bruce Wydick’s caricature of the “shrewd Samaritan.” In Wydick’s own words, shrewd Samaritans are people who “are motivated by feelings of compassion and a yearning for justice, but their actions are guided by careful reflection that is centered on the well-being of the other” (Wydick 2019). Both advocate for progression beyond ignorance of and indifference to the social, economic, and political challenges of the world by emphasizing investigation and introspection about our action. Moreover, Blattman’s caricature—perhaps even more so than Wydick’s—syncs well with James Davison Hunter’s vision of “faithful presence” that advocates for Christians to aim less for grand dominance and celebrity but to more thoughtfully, diligently,

and faithfully engage the world within our own present sphere of influence (Hunter 2010).

“Why We Fight” is a clear must-read for anyone interested in work promoting peace around the world. However, I also recommend this book for anyone interested in pursuing thoughtful and effective action aiming to promote justice, equity, and socio-economic inclusion in a broad sense. Blattman develops a framework for guiding our efforts that balances both effectiveness and patience. This is a rare perspective, but one that is necessary as we work in the already but not yet reality of the Kingdom of God.

### References

- Hunter, J.D. (2010) *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, Oxford University Press, United Kingdom.
- Wydick, B. (2019) *Shrewd Samaritan: Faith, Economics, and the Road to Loving Our Global Neighbor*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, Tennessee.

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