

Scandalous Folly: The Cross or the Sword

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And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

My proposition is simple: Christian support of or participation in violence, coercion or retaliation, whether collective or individual, with or without legal authority, is incompatible with the example and teachings of Christ and the New Testament.

This is a topic that can be approached in many different ways. Do to time constraints I will only examine it from two angles.

The position I am espousing represents a 180° reversal in my previous way of thinking. Like many Christians I had been taught that it was my civic, patriotic and Christian duty to support and even participate in retaliation and violence, particularly in war, when undertaken by governing authorities for “just causes.”

In this paper I am dealing only with what Christians are to do in this matter. I am not here concerned with the rights and obligations of the state or society. Clearly scripture acknowledges certain rights and obligations of the state.¹ The question at hand is, what are Christians obligated to do regardless of the wants, needs or demands of the government, society or even family regarding retaliation and violence? Frequently Bible commentators have struggled with how to reconcile key passages that touch on this area, especially those found in the Sermon on the Mount, precisely because of a failure to see that the teachings of the Sermon are for disciples of Christ in contradistinction to the rest of society. The Sermon on the Mount was never intended to be a program for ordering society, defining an economic system or running a national government.

In arguing for Christian nonparticipation in violence and retaliation I am not at all advocating Christian surrender to Satan or evil. Nor am I arguing for some form of Christian quietism and withdrawal from society. If anything, the disciple of Jesus is called to openly confront satanic powers. But the question is, do we as believers “fight” evil using the tools and methods of the world, or are we to confront them in an entirely different manner using the *biblical means*? After all, the task given to the church is global mission and it is in that capacity more than any other that Christians confront the forces of evil. The proclamation of the gospel is one of the non-carnal weapons God has given to the church by which she engages in battle with the forces of Satan.²

Jesus Christ is Lord:

Obviously Jesus and what God has done in Him are at the center of our faith. Unfortunately, stemming from almost 2,000 years of effort to domesticate the Jesus of scripture, it is difficult to appreciate just how radical a challenge Jesus poses to individuals, the church and the existing world order. Too many church leaders have worked to purge Jesus of His messianic office and characteristics, to tone down and even redirect the eschatological focus of the New Testament, to redefine the kingdom of God as something strictly internal and “spiritual,” and to water down or

simply ignore the “apocalyptic” language and imagery threaded through much of the New Testament.

A Jesus who is a philosopher, sage or great moral teacher is a Jesus who poses no threat to the institutions, power structures or values of the present age. But a messianic figure proclaiming the impending arrival of God’s kingdom ON THE EARTH and WITHIN THIS SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM, and who calls men and women to radical reversal in their lives in preparation for it, can only be perceived as a threat by the existing structures of this world. Though I am advocating nonparticipation in violence and retaliation, this is not to say that the example and teachings of Christ are nonpolitical. The proclamation of a future kingdom that will replace all existing political and social institutions along with the cosmic lordship of Jesus, are very much politically charged claims.

Due to ideas prevalent in western culture we have become accustomed to drawing sharp distinctions in our lives between the religious and the secular, personal rights and obligations versus civic duty, private and public life. But such ways of thinking are of relatively recent origin and stem to a great extent from the reaction of the Enlightenment to the abuses of state churches in Europe, hence the western democratic ideal of separation of church and state.

The biblical declaration of the lordship of Jesus is absolute.³ For the believer Jesus Christ is the one and only Lord,⁴ the only one to whom God has granted all authority in heaven and earth.⁵ This is the same Lord who sits at God's right hand far above all rule, authority, power and dominion whether in the present age or the age to come, and all things have been placed in subjection under his feet.⁶ As a result of God's exaltation of Christ all things in heaven, on the earth and even under the earth will eventually confess that Jesus is Lord, for all things, whether in heaven or on the earth, visible or invisible, including all powers and authorities, were created for him.⁷ There is no area of life or the universe that has been exempted from His sovereignty.

The counterpart to the lordship of Jesus is the believer’s response to it. The Christian is called to follow in the footsteps of his or her lord in absolute submission to His authority. The disciple is commanded to deny himself, take up his cross and follow Jesus exclusively and wholeheartedly, and any believer refusing to do so is unworthy of Jesus and by definition is not His disciple.⁸ The one who would be Jesus' disciple is required to love his Lord more than even the closest members of his own family and loyalty to Christ is to supersede all other allegiances, obligations and commitments.⁹ The Christian is defined among other things as a "slave of Christ."¹⁰ He or she cannot pick and choose when to obey the Master. For that matter, the believer may be called upon to lose all his possessions for the sake of the gospel, and ought to be willing to forsake all for Christ, even life itself.¹¹

The lordship of Jesus Christ and the complete allegiance to Him required of the believer and church allows for no gray areas, no room for compromise, no wiggle room. He is Lord over every aspect of our lives or he is Lord over none. This is precisely why the revolutionary challenge posed by Jesus is so alarming to the existing world order and why it often reacts negatively against the church. Tyrants like Hitler and Stalin did not persecute believers over theological differences, but because committed believers would not give them absolute allegiance. Or perhaps in today’s climate it would be better to say, if we believed and lived thusly the world would react in such a way to us. Some claim that the church is at its healthiest and becomes the most committed when it suffers persecution. I think there is a good deal of truth in this. But perhaps we have the cart before the horse. I wonder, would it be more accurate to say that the church would suffer persecution if it was thoroughly committed and healthy? A Christian

faith that accommodates the world and adapts itself to the world's values and methods ruffles few feathers.

A thoroughgoing biblical faith cannot be corralled into neat compartments that separate the religious from the private or personal faith from public duty. There is no aspect of one's life that is off limits to Jesus. This is not to say that we are not obligated before God to fulfill our responsibilities to our families, employers and so on. Doing an excellent job at work does not conflict with our allegiance to Christ. If anything our commitment to Him should result in good job performance. We also are taught in scripture to respect earthly authorities and to show proper submission to government. However, when family, employer, society or state demand of the believer that which Jesus forbids or reserves to Himself, they must not be obeyed. Submission and respect are not synonymous with obedience. If, for example, our employer asks us to participate in something dishonest or illegal, we must refuse to do so even if that means loss of employment. At such times "we ought to obey God rather than man."¹²

Just War Theory operates on the premise that killing and violence are inherently wrong. However, it accepts that reality dictates the necessity in certain circumstances of resorting to violence. When times get dicey realpolitik trumps scripture. One purpose of Just War Theory is to define those special circumstances and thereby keep war and violence contained within desired bounds. At heart Just War Theory is a set of *pragmatic* rather than *principled* rules designed to deal with unpleasant *realities*. It's essential assumption is that there are times when society or government must use *evil means* in order to *achieve just or good ends*. We know what Jesus commanded but sometimes it just doesn't work!

A key component of Just War Theory is that war and other forms of "justified" violence must be conducted under the authorization of a legitimate governing authority. That is, individuals or groups retaliating without legal authority is prohibited. No private individual or business entity has the legal right to use force or violence. Per Just War Theory, only government agencies have that right and only for "just causes."

The appeal to legal authority as justification for retaliation is the basis on which some Bible commentators find loopholes in Jesus' prohibition against retaliation in the Sermon on the Mount.¹³ Those who would follow Jesus must never engage in *personal retaliation*, so the argument goes, but *collective retaliation under the authority of the state* is justified and therefore it is appropriate for believers to support or participate in it. However such a self-serving explanation must be read into the text. Distinctions between private and public, personal and collective, religious versus civic duty, are nowhere mentioned in Matthew 5:38-48. Similarly, when Paul admonishes BELIEVERS in Romans 12:17-21 to never repay evil with evil, to never avenge themselves, and to overcome evil with good, his words are unequivocal and all encompassing. Paul wrote "never," not "never except when..."

The practice of dividing our lives into distinct compartments is a means used to bypass the more radical demands of scripture and thus circumvent the lordship of Jesus. By compartmentalizing our lives into distinct private, public and religious segments, we declare that certain portions of our lives are off limits to the sovereignty of Jesus. There are compartments where His rule does not apply. This is precisely what we do if we argue that we cannot *personally retaliate* but have a civic duty to do so when authorized by the state or operating as a public official.

One of the most chilling passages in the New Testament is Matthew 7:21 where Jesus states, "not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." At the final judgment many will come proclaiming

Jesus as their Lord yet will be rejected because their refusal to adhere to the will of the Father as explicated in the Sermon on the Mount will demonstrate that Jesus never was Lord of their lives. The “will of the Father” to which this passage specifically refers is the content of the Sermon on the Mount including its prohibition against retaliation and command to love one’s enemies. If you wish to be children of and perfect like our Father in heaven you must bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you, for The Father Himself makes the sun rise on the evil as well as the good, and sends rain to bless both the just and the unjust.¹⁴

And this is the first of my two points. *Believer participation in retaliation and violence of any kind is antithetical to the lordship of Christ.* Considering that the New Testament is univocal and unequivocal regarding Christian participation in retaliation, force and violence, and that Jesus is the absolute Lord of, well, everything, there is simply no room for Christian support of or participation in such things. Those who argue otherwise are effectively claiming that there are some areas of life where reality dictates that we must do evil in order that good might come, where sin ceases to be sin, and where Jesus does not rule as Lord of all.

The Pattern of Discipleship:

As stated previously, the counterpart of the lordship of Christ is the appropriate response of the disciple. But just what does that mean, what is the “shape” of discipleship? How do we evaluate our lives and determine how we are to behave, think and so on? What is the pattern to which we need to conform our lives?

I will begin by reading Philippians 2:6-11; “who, being in the form of God did not consider the being like God a thing to be seized, instead he poured himself out having taken the form of a slave, having come to be in the likeness of men, having been found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself having become obedient unto death, even the death of a cross. Wherefore God did highly exalt him and granted to him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow - of those in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”

Paul uses the example of Jesus’ submission to God, even to the point of suffering a most horrific death, as the pattern for the Philippians to emulate in humble service to one another. In this passage Christ’s exaltation is portrayed as a direct result of his obedience *even unto death* and the climax of the first half of the hymn is not just His obedience unto death, but even to death *by means of crucifixion*. It was that willing act that effected Jesus’ exaltation to Lord of all. That is, if He had failed in this would presumably He would not have been made Lord. It is this example of obedience that Paul encourages the Philippians to imitate in their everyday lives.

A side effect of centuries of metaphysical speculations about Jesus’ nature(s?) is that it is difficult for us to conceptualize a Jesus who was genuinely human *as are we*. It is much easier to imagine a Jesus who was in some sense supra human. Certainly there were many unique aspects to Jesus, His life and ministry, but the New Testament never loses sight of His real humanity and that God has intervened on behalf of the world in a concrete historical event. While we believe that God has accomplished the forgiveness of sins by means of the cross, it is difficult for us to understand how Christ’s suffering and death are exemplary for our own lives.

Paul uses the crucifixion of Jesus as the exemplar of the Christian life, the pattern to which the disciple is to conform. The cross becomes the benchmark against which believers are to measure their lives, the mold into which the Christian is to be poured. To many today the cross is

little more than jewelry, yet in the New Testament Christ crucified is paradigmatic for all of Christian life.

This use of Christ crucified as the means by which we evaluate ourselves and the world around us, is clearest in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 where Paul argues that the message of a crucified messiah, though foolishness to those who are perishing, is God's very wisdom and power, the means by which God has chosen to bring about the redemption of the cosmos and the defeat of all the powers that are opposed to Him.

In the Roman Empire crucifixion was only one of several forms of capital punishment. Crucifixion was primarily used to do away with rebellious slaves and political malcontents, those whom Rome perceived to be a threat to the political order. Although crucifixion was an excruciating way to die its primary purpose was to publicly degrade the victim. The Greco-Roman world was very much an honor-shame culture and in Roman society nothing was worse than to be dishonored. The reason for publicly scourging the condemned and crucifying him naked was to humiliate the victim. Although Jesus' case was exceptional the normal practice was to leave the victim's corpse on the cross until it fell off due to decomposition as a final act of degradation.

To claim that an apparently failed pretender to the Jewish monarchy who had been subjected to such a degrading form of execution at the hands of a most powerful empire, is the means by which God has accomplished victory, could only be viewed as sheer nonsense by the gentile residents of the Empire. This was utter defeat and yet that upstart tentmaker from Tarsus was proclaiming that *this* was actually God's great victory over Sin, Death and all the powers opposed to God, that *this* was the revelation of God's wisdom and power!? Such an audacious and ridiculous claim was fundamentally moronic to a gentile audience hence Paul's claim that the message of a crucified Messiah was folly to the Greeks.

A common interpretation of Deut. 21:23 among the Jews of Jesus' day was that "being hung on a tree," meant crucifixion.¹⁵ "Cursed is everyone hung on a tree!" By definition one who was crucified was cursed by God, outside of the covenant. From the human point of view not only had Jesus failed to liberate and restore Israel, this messiah had also been put to death in a humiliating way by Israel's most hated enemy. This was scandalous to Jews, not the claim that Jesus was Messiah, but that he had been "crucified *as Messiah*."¹⁶ How could a man who had been executed by the Romans be Israel's Messiah?

The crucifixion of Christ is something that runs contrary to the wisdom of the world, something that completely subverts the way the world evaluates things. In the cross God has displayed a form of wisdom alien to the human mind, victory by means of defeat, salvation through the powerless death of Christ on the cross. A Roman would happily accept an imperial figure like Augustus leading his powerful legions as the representative of God, and while a First-Century Jew might rejoice over a warrior Messiah come to slay the enemies of Israel with fire from heaven, a crucified messiah was oxymoronic.

"If [Christ crucified] is the revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, then our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down. Everything has to be reevaluated in light of the cross....Paul has taken the central event at the heart of the Christian story—the death of Jesus—and used it as the lens through which all human experience must be projected and thereby seen afresh."¹⁷

In a world characterized by competing power structures, war, violence, jealousy and vengeance, where the necessity to engage in retaliation is seen as self evident, where military

exploits and valor are glorified, the very idea of evil being defeated through the futile sacrifice of an impotent individual is idiotic. It defies human experience, reason and “wisdom.” It is a departure from “reality.” Yet it is this very thing that reveals God’s power and wisdom. And what are the messages we hear today? Force must be met with even more force! No surrender in the face of evil! Might makes right. Displays of weakness only encourage an enemy! We must fight for our rights! To do otherwise is foolishness, *scandalous folly*.

Peter admonishes us in 1 Peter 2:21, “for you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.” Peter holds up Christ’s suffering, the cross, as our pattern. This is the “shape” of the Christian life, our lives are to be *cruciform*. Obviously I’m not suggesting that anyone will ever repeat Jesus’ crucifixion. That was a one-time event. For that matter, most of us will never experience torture and violent death for the sake of the gospel. But how we think, how we act, how we see the world and evaluate events around us, should all be determined by Christ crucified.

Jesus was brought as a lamb to the slaughter yet he opened not his mouth in defense. When reviled he reviled not, while suffering he threatened no one. When struck in the face He did not strike back. When arrested he refused to take up the sword, instead He healed the ear of *one sent to do Him harm*. Jesus could have called twelve legions of angels to rescue him, but did not. If ever there was a case of innocent blood being put to death unjustly, this was it. If ever there was a cause worth fighting for, was this not it? Note well that in the Book of Revelation those who follow the slaughtered Lamb, who are viciously and unjustly persecuted by the Beast, attain victory in the end not by fighting or responding in kind to the Beast, but by the blood of the Lamb, through their prophetic witness and because they loved not their lives unto death.

And this is my second point; *Christ crucified is the great paradigm for how Christians are to live and is the foundation of the worldview of those who are “in Christ.”* Obviously there is much more to Paul’s gospel message than the bare fact of Christ’s crucifixion. But Paul often uses the cross or Christ crucified as the summation of his gospel. All of Jesus’ teachings and examples are of relevance to the believer but we must never lose sight of the fact that they are in continuity with what God did by means of Christ’s death on the cross.

What I am pleading for is a return to the *imitation of Christ* by the modern Christian with particular emphasis on emulating Him by taking up our cross and living a cruciform life. A favorite adage in popular Christianity is, “what would Jesus do?” But a far better way to put this is, “what *did* Jesus do?” Following Jesus’ example will mark one out as a fool in the eyes of the world, as a “weakling.” They will accuse you of surrendering to evil, of failing to fulfill even your “Christian duty.” But since God has chosen to make His power manifest in human weakness, and since He is the all-powerful one Who created all things, the most scandalous folly of all would be to choose the ways of the world, to lean on the arm of flesh.

The message of Christ crucified and the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ have broad implications for virtually every aspect of our lives. The question of Christian participation in violence is only one such aspect. Nonetheless, retaliation and violence are fundamentally antithetical to the cross and lordship of Christ. I encourage each of you to evaluate every call or impulse to support or engage in violence in the light of the crucified Messiah Who is now Lord of all.

¹ Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17.

² 2 Cor. 10:3-5; Eph. 6:13-18

³ Matt. 10:38; 16:24; 28:18; Luke 9:23-27; Acts 10:36; Rom. 14:9-11; Eph. 1:20-23; Phil. 2:10-11.

⁴ 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:5.

⁵ Matt. 28:18.

⁶ Eph. 1:20-23; Psa. 2:8-9; 110:1.

⁷ Col. 1:16.

⁸ Matt. 16:24; Matt. 10:38; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27.

⁹ Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26.

¹⁰ Matt. 10:24; 24:46; 1 Cor. 7:2-23; Eph. 6:6.

¹¹ Matt. 13:45-46; Mark 8:35; 10:28-29; Luke 14:33; Phil. 3:7-10.

¹² Acts 5:29.

¹³ Matt. 5:38-48.

¹⁴ Matt. 5:44-48.

¹⁵ Gal. 3:10-13.

¹⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), pg. 209.

¹⁷ Richard B. Hays, *I Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), pg. 27. Cf. *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, pg. 14.