

Resisting Evil

In recent years, there seems to be a great deal of debate and confusion how Christians should respond to evil. Eric Metaxas addresses this issue in a recently published book, *A Letter to the American Church*. Metaxas uses the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to consider this question. Bonhoeffer is a highly respected German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis just prior to the end of World War II for his alleged participation in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer has three responses to this question in his essay, *The Church and the Jewish Question*, which he wrote in April 1933, three months after Hitler assumed leadership of the Reichstag.

He wrote: "The state which endangers the Christian proclamation, negates itself. All this means that there are three possible ways in which the church can act toward the state: In the first place, it has been said, it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate in accordance with its character as state, i.e. it can throw the state back on its responsibilities. Secondly, it can aid the victims of state action. The church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. 'Do good to all men'. In both these courses of action, the church serves the free state in its free way, and at times when laws are changed the church may in no way withdraw itself from these two tasks. The third possibility is not to just bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself. Such action would be direct political action, and is only possible and required when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order."

According to historian Renate Wind, professor of theology at the Lutheran School of Theology, University Applied Sciences, Nurnberg, Germany, the intent of Bonhoeffer's words "spoke in the wheel" would be "the church has to throw itself between the spokes of the wheel in order to stop it".¹

The problem of resisting evil for Christians produces three questions: 1) Does the Gospel intersect with the world/governments in a way that produces conflict? 2) How did the apostles and others in the New Testament resist evil? 3) How did Jesus resist evil? The Bible is not silent on these questions. Evil is addressed in a general sense while also giving specific responses to these questions.

General guidance, My comment: The entire Holy Bible is written to inform us about evil, how to resist, and how to overcome (Deuteronomy 30:15-20, I Corinthians 2:5-11, Ephesians 6:13, James 4:7).

The Gospel being in conflict with the world, My comment: Observations of life, daily news, and our personal stress all point to this conflict (Matthew 10:34-38, 11:12, 14:1-13, 16:24-25, 23:27-36, Luke 16:16-17, Acts 5:22-42, Ephesians 4:11-25, Philippians 1:27-30, Colossians 2:1-5, Hebrews 12:1-4, James 1:27).

The apostles and others resisting evil, My comment: The apostles, Luke, Stephen, Timothy, and others were obedient to what God asked them to do to represent Him. God had a different calling for each person mostly involving spiritual assignments rather than things political in nature. Paul however, used politics when it was to his advantage to do so (Acts 16:37-39, 22:25-29). Some were martyred for their effort (Acts 4:5-22, 5:17-42, 23:6-10, Luke 10:30-37).

Jesus resisting evil, My comment: Jesus resisted evil whenever He came into its presence... which was often. He never ignored evil or pretended it did not exist. He confronted it on a personal level (Matt. 4:1-11, John 8:3-11), group level (Matt. 23:27-29), in the synagogue (Luke 19:47), in the countryside (Matt. 14:13-21), directly (Luke 18:18-25, John 4:3-26), indirectly through parables and stories (Matt.13:3-9), actively (Mark 11:15-18), and passively (Matt.

¹ academic.oup.com/jcs/article, A Spoke in the Wheel. by Renate Wind

26:47-56, 27:11-14) yet, all without becoming political. Jesus never criticized the Roman government (Matt. 22: 15-22) or campaigned against it in any fashion. His focus was on doing the work His Father put before Him.

Discussion

The gospel is often in conflict with the governments of the world...we should follow the example of Jesus by seeking the wisdom of God and looking for peaceable solutions. He desires for each of us to give Him our whole heart, our thought life, emotions, our will (our speech and our actions, as our witness). These are the things belonging to the Kingdom of God. Politics belong to the world.

The hard part for Christians is discerning what specific witness God is calling each of us to give. We have to be looking for what God wants us to do wherever we find ourselves. He is always working and wants us to join him in what he is doing.² It seems likely He will not call every person to give the same witness. He did not call every person to give the same witness in the New Testament. Christians have different gifts, different sets of life experiences, different venues, different personalities, and different degrees of faith. He will use each of us for His own good purposes in His unique ways. It seems probable different people will be called to witness following the different examples Jesus and others provided which are noted above. At one extreme a person may be called to witness similar to Stephen's witness in the early church resulting in martyrdom. (Acts 7:54-60). Pastor Andrew Brunson's story of two years of Turkish imprisonment would fall into this category.³ At the other end of the spectrum many would be called to prayer about the actions of the state. There is an appropriate time for passivity such as refusing to obey laws which promote evil. We are all called to obey God rather than men. This has been referred to by the as civil disobedience. This will produce conflict with the agents of the government.

Do not be confused about the passivity of Adam in the Garden of Eden and the passivity of Jesus during His conversation with Pontus Pilate. Adam's passivity originated from his own thought processes while the passivity of Jesus, refusing to answer some of Pilate's questions, came from God.

Many who resist will be falsely accused of racism, discrimination, crimes against the state, etc. etc. just as Jesus was falsely accused. Some of these people will face job loss, legal action, imprisonment, ostracism, financial penalties, betrayal by friends and neighbors, and what ever other penalties the state can conjure up in their minds (John 15:18-21). God promises to go through those trials at our side.

Many will experience a crisis of belief, a crisis of faith, when they realize what God is calling them to do. They do not rely on the promise of the Holy Spirit empowering them to do what they cannot do on their own (II Chronicles 7:12-16, II Corinthians 12:7-10). They will trust their own plan instead of trusting God. They will struggle with fear and the distasteful reality of loss of their comfortable life. How that will impact their salvation is a judgement left to Christ.

Sadly, many people today are only talking about evil and doing nothing to stop it. They are worshipping the idols of comfort and fear. Comfort has taken the place of relationship with Christ. Comfort and fear are snares distracting us from our relationship with Jesus (Proverbs 29:25). Fear destroys trust. It prevents hearing what God is calling us to do. Fear produces flawed thinking and behavior often leading the Christian astray in response to evil behavior by the state (Proverbs 29:25, Matt. 6:24-34, 26:69-75, II Timothy 1:7-8). Instead of being passive or fearful like Adam God calls Christians to be wise about which master we are planning to serve (Genesis 4: 3-7, Proverbs 1:20-33, Romans 6:16, 13:1-7).

² Experiencing God by Henry, Richard, Mike Blackaby, and Claude V King

³ Prepare to Stand, a series of u-tube videos and book by the name "God's Hostage" both by Pastor Andrew Brunson

Resisting evil begins with a process of assessment examining whom we are trusting. Do not rely on self assessment for this determination. The self is often deceived. Get objective input. The process of discernment follows, first discerning what is evil, and then, discerning how God is inviting us to represent Him in resisting evil. We should not ignore evil or pretend it does not exist. Any speech or action Christians direct toward the state should originate from God, be consistent with His Word, and be empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is what constitutes a spiritual response rather than a political one.

This principle is observed in the story of the the pharisees who brought the question about the lawfulness of taxes levied by the Roman government (Matthew 22:15-22). Jesus asked them to bring to Him a Roman coin. After noting the coin bore the likeness of Caesar, Jesus said, "Pay, therefore, to Caesar the things that are due to Cesar, and pay to God, the things that are due to God." The pharisees admired His wisdom but **refused to give their hearts** to Him because their own **hearts were hardened**. This has always been the case between the kingdoms of the world and the Kingdom of God. The pharisees had established their own kingdom where they worshipped the idols of greed, power, and pride.

In His response to the question about paying taxes to Caesar Jesus implied political kingdoms have their own sets of laws which its citizens should obey. These are the worldly kingdoms appointed by God such as we currently have in Washington D.C., our state capitols, and elsewhere. Civil rule from various governmental authorities are part of God's plan.

Conclusions

To return to Bonhoeffer's three points in his essay, scripture confirms the following 1) the church is the conscience of the state, 2) the church has a responsibility to minister to victims of the state, 3) the church should throw it self between the spokes of the wheel to stop it from crushing those who are under it. Our witness can be an example God gives us to throw into the wheel to slow or stop it. Jesus is the strongest witness needed to stop the wheel. He is the God man that can change the hearts of all the people who are turning the wheel and stop the wheel from crushing the people under it. We need to point people to Jesus. Jesus' ministry was focused on reconciling us to God. God's kingdom is spiritual in nature...stemming from relationship with Jesus, following Him and becoming more like Him. This spiritual kingdom originates from the Father.

Most of the time this will not involve political action but rather a spiritual response in which the Christian discerns what God is asking him to do, and does it...just as Jesus did what the Father asked Him to do when He dwelt among us. Jesus did nothing to perpetuate the working of evil nor did He do anything to enable it. He never countered evil with evil. Neither should we. This would preclude being involved in a plot to assassinate a political leader such as Adolph Hitler or acting in violence for the purpose of revenge.

A small number of Christians will be called to politics: to run for office, provide support services, advise on policy decisions, and a variety of other tasks. Obviously, every eligible Christian should vote, which polls suggest many do not. Not voting is a manifestation of the passivity we inherited from Adam in the Garden of Eden. It always has a poor outcome.

One very important question: What to do when your boundaries are violated in emotional abuse, bullying, criminal activities, or war? Answer: you have to reestablish your boundaries to prevent the same or worse experiences from happening in the future. This should be a measured response not allowing yourself to be drawn into the same or worse evil which happened to you. Forgiving the person who offended you, praying for him, and going to Jesus for healing, will help you respond appropriately with wisdom.⁴

Jesus relied on the wisdom of the Father for his answer about the Roman coin which resulted in a peaceable solution to a potential conflict. Jesus always spoke the truth in love when He responded to evil. Sometimes it was tough love, i.e., love inviting an examination of our own

⁴ Lessons for Life after Kindergarten by Terry Trudel, see the therapies of Ruth and Abigail

behavior calling for repentance (Luke 18:18-23). We need to practice speaking the truth in love. It's not easy. Scripture counsels speaking the truth in love is necessary to grow into the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16). This would reduce or even stop the unproductive arguments sometimes resulting from examining these issues.

When following Jesus you are on the road less travelled. Somewhere on that road you will encounter an empty cross. On close inspection you will find your name on it (Matthew 16:24-27). Will you pick it up or pass by without noticing it and not considering what God is asking you to do. This is a question for every Christian.