

How Do We Respond to a Violent Culture?

The tragedy of Newtown, Conn., the Colorado theater massacre and other egregious violations of our communal serenity demonstrate that in the 21st century, the spirit of Herod still lives. In the New Testament, the biblical narratives include the presence of three different Herods. The first Herod persecuted Jesus as a baby, the second Herod prosecuted John the Baptist and the third Herod executed disciples. Each embodied an unbridled commitment to mindless violence.

To that extent, the spirit of Herod still lives.

Nevertheless, it's important to understand that in the midst of so much violence today, there exists a prophetic supposition of hope. In other words, there exists today a Spirit more powerful than the spirit of Herod.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must declare that the most powerful Spirit alive today is not the one that persecutes, prosecutes or executes. The most powerful Spirit is the one that redeems, restores and resurrects. In spite of the media-exacerbated reality of a culture saturated in violence, the most powerful Spirit alive today is none other than the Holy Spirit of Almighty God.

Yet as Christians, we cannot negate that a culture of violence permeates all aspects of our society today. Therefore, as Christ followers, we must answer the following queries: *What is an appropriate and biblical response to violence in today's culture and society? What place, if any, should "righteous indignation" have for Christians? What about Jesus becoming angry and cleansing the temple on two different occasions? What does God have to say about working with, ministering to and forgiving those who have committed acts of violence?*

Re-Embrace the Prophetic

Let's begin with the biblical response to violence in today's culture and society. In order for the church to respond, we must embrace the biblical impetus and moral imperative to speak into culture. We must capture once again our prophetic mantle.

There's a fine line between the prophetic and the pathetic. The prophetic, which is defined as truth-telling, requires the church to recognize that the most important problem in America is not moral relativism, cultural decadence or spiritual apathy. The number-one problem in America stems from the unfortunate posture of a lukewarm church.

The church, once the most catalytic and influential institution in community, stands guilty of sacrificing biblical truth on the altar of political expediency. To a great degree, we stand guilty of abandoning our prophetic, truth-telling mantle and our ontologically derived purpose.

Saints, silence is not option when in 2013 America, men abandon their roles as fathers, children are slaughtered, pornography marries technology, God is mocked, pushers are more admired than preachers, school grounds look like battlegrounds, and our neighbors sit paralyzed by the gate called Beautiful, begging for change. Silence is not option when violence not only captivates our actions but also our thoughts and language.

Hence, the first step in offering a counter-narrative to the endless cycle of violence that saturates society is the awakening of the only institution guaranteed never to be silenced by violence: the church.

Reclaim the Image of God

The church's response must include the reintroduction of an idea that revolutionized the Roman Empire—and the world, for that matter. Early Christendom built the initial firewall

against unbridled violence in society when it proposed the concept of the *imago Dei*, the image of God. We carry a responsibility to assist those who suffer from spiritual and cultural myopia with the corrective lens of seeing God's image in every human being.

For the image of God lives in all human beings: black and white, rich and poor, straight and gay, conservative and liberal, citizen and undocumented. Our challenge is to see the image of God in every human being, including those we disagree with. Our challenge is to see the image of God even in those who persecute and slander us. Our challenge is to see the image of God in those who oppose us. Our challenge is to see the image of God in the suffering, the marginalized, the oppressed and the hurting. Our challenge is to see the image of God in friend and foe, acquaintance and stranger, strong and weak, oppressor and liberator.

Recognizing the image of God in those around us serves as a significant deterrent to acts of violence. In practically every post-violent episode, the perpetrator has alluded to a lack of humanity seen in those upon whom they brought their actions. In other words, the violent offender objectifies their victim in a matter that extrapolates any notion of humanity, significance or spiritual value in them. Diluting the image of God in a person enables the culprit to engage in acts of aggression with minimal conviction of something done wrong.

Recognizing the image of God in every human being must result in engaging with the *habitus Christus*, or the habits of Christ, toward our fellow man. Such actions reconcile sanctification with service, conviction with compassion, and holiness with humility. Violent acts stand limited in a culture that champions life and recognizes the image of God in each and every being.

Reconsider the Power of Words

We've all heard this saying since we were school kids, knocking around in the playground: "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." The intent behind this saying is a good one, to be sure. We say it to steel young minds and hearts against the inevitable bruises of childhood and adolescence. Even the coolest kids get called names. The vulnerable, the uncool among them, suffer incalculable verbal abuse.

As hard as we might try, did any of us ever believe name-calling didn't hurt? Even today—now that we are older and hopefully wiser, having experienced the heartaches of everyday life more fully than we may have as kids—is "words will never hurt me" a maxim we can stand behind? The Lamb's agenda says no. Words *do* hurt, and we should not be the ones inflicting pain.

Today, given the electro-charged public square in which we speak, our words can cause enormous damage to any number of people within seconds of them leaving our mouths. Once gone, there is no pulling them back. There's no erasing them. Those words may live in the cybersphere forever.

As Christians, we should not add useless wind to this electronic maelstrom. Instead, we must lead by example. We should measure our language, especially when assessing our critics. Derogatory terms for other human beings, regardless of how widely those person's views differ from ours—or, more importantly, from the truths of Scripture—should not pass through our lips.

"For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of," Jesus said in Matthew 12:34. What Jesus meant was that it is far more than a failure of tone when we marginalize or malign those with whom we disagree. The solution is not just "nicer" words but a transformed perspective, a more acute vision, one that sees all human beings, including opponents, through the eyes of our *proponent*, Jesus.

Accordingly, we must repudiate all vestiges of articulated terror. Let a generation arise that will dare to speak to both the heathen and the Pharisees. Let a generation arise committed to turning the tables of the money-changers in the temple and to writing on the ground while saying, "He who is without sin, throw the first stone."

Righteous indignation compels us to marry truth with love and conviction with compassion. It enables us to redeem the narrative of prophetic Christianity by establishing a firewall against the spirit of violence—a spirit that can be quenched when we speak with civility and reach out with charity.

Rethink the Proper Response

But wasn't Jesus turning the tables a violent act or, in the best case scenario, a demonstration of anger? Jesus, without a doubt, exhibited righteous indignation when he revealed the religious hypocrisy and apathy captured in the actions of the money-changers and dove-sellers.

Yet the revolutionary and catalytic message of "turning the other cheek" best frames the loving and graceful metric of authentic Christ-following. For example, when Christ rebuked Peter for engaging his sword and cutting off the ear of a participant attempting to arrest Jesus, our Lord exhibited a heart for a nonviolent, righteous, civil posture poised to transform the world.

Consequently, the church's role includes reforming the culture and equipping Christ-followers to minister healing to the victim while simultaneously providing deliverance to the perpetrator. The born-again church must empower Christians with the knowledge that the violence in our communities stems from a spiritual deficiency and not just a sociocultural breach. In addition, we cannot negate the reality of mental illness that serves as the facilitative womb for so many violent acts.

Therefore, when politicians attempt to provide political solutions to a problem with a clear spiritual dimension, let us not hold our silence. Understandably, building a firewall against Herod stems not from the agenda of the donkey or the elephant but from the agenda of the Lamb.

At the end of day, the church's role in addressing the spiral of violence requires spiritual fortitude, prophetic courage, a biblical impetus and an anointing to reiterate the words of a young shepherd boy as he confronted a giant threatening him with violent acts: "You come against me with a sword, a spear and a javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord God Almighty!"

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