

What the Bible Has to Say About Our Nation's Outrage

When history looks back on the days in which we are living, one inevitable headline will feature the dramatic escalation of anger, protests, and even riots—taking aim at hotly debated concerns and even our recently-elected president. Regardless of the issues in contention or who is in the White House, the question remains as to how we are to view this increase of frustration-driven mass outcry as we seek to embrace a distinctly Christian perspective. Actually, the New Testament offers some pertinent and practical wisdom.

New Testament Protesters

My devotional reading this week has been reminiscent of the nightly news as I rediscovered accounts of numerous and angry crowd uprisings. The book of Acts chronicles the Apostle Paul's determination to aggressively spread the gospel among both Jews and Gentiles. In town after town, jealous Jewish leaders incited persecution among the people—driving Paul and Barnabas out of the city, in another case stoning them, and in another beating and jailing them (Acts 13:45,50; 14:19; 16:19-24). In the town of Thessalonica, we read that “the Jews who did not believe became jealous and, taking some evil men from the marketplace, gathered a crowd, stirred up the city ... (Acts 17:5a). Later, these same Jewish leaders tracked down Paul and Barnabas in a distant town and began “stirring up the crowds” (Acts 17:13b) against the gospel-preaching duo. Of course, the names, circumstances and issues are different today but the motivations of the human heart and group behaviors are very much the same.

Tactics of Control

In my newest book, *The Prayer God Loves to Answer*, I tell the

story of an incident that occurred when, as a young associate pastor, I was working for John MacArthur, a renowned Bible teacher and pastor in Southern California. One day, his wife, Patricia, was conversing with a group of us young guys and made a staggering statement when she admitted, "In all our years of marriage, I've never seen John lose his temper." We were baffled and tried to neutralize our guilt by responding, "That's because you don't play basketball with him!"

As you might guess, the statement captivated me. So, in a later conversation, I asked John to explain Patricia's observation. He responded, "Well, it is my theology. You see, anger is a control mechanism, and I have such a high view of the sovereignty of God that, apart from some rare occasions of true righteous indignation, there's really not a lot that I have to get angry about." That proved to be a memorable and transformational conversation for me.

Protests are commonly driven by a need to control the agenda and/or perceived threat from some opposing person, policy or political party. In the history of our nation, some protests have effected change; most have just been a media moment and, in some cases, the cause of very unfortunate destruction to property and lives. I would hasten to note that there is a difference between a furious and bad-mannered demonstration and a peaceful, positive rally for a worthy cause. Both express our First Amendment rights as Americans. Both do not represent a biblical attitude and approach.

A Biblical Approach

The New Testament was addressed to Christians living under the rule of a godless, idolatrous, pagan, oppressive and largely anti-Christian government, embodied in the Roman Empire. This is important because, as uneasy as we may feel about our government, we must remember that Rome was certainly no friend of faith and an easy target for protest and open disdain. Yet, in this context, Jesus, Paul and Peter offered clear biblical

guidance.

Pay Your Taxes Dutifully: Jesus' teaching was clear, both in His example and admonition: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21b).

Pray for Leaders Faithfully: Paul elevates prayer as a high priority in our lives and congregational engagement, and tells us to pray "for kings and for all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty" (1 Tim. 2:2). Note the word "all." Also note that our praying changes us (not necessarily the leaders) so that we will live a distinctly Christian life. (Review the character qualities in this verse.)

Respect Leaders Honorably: Peter's words are profound in our culture of protest, especially as we realize that he wrote to suffering and persecuted Christians:

Submit yourselves to every human authority for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king, as supreme, or to governors, as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and to praise those who do right. For it is the will of God that by doing right you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. As free people, do not use your liberty as a covering for evil, but live as servants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king (1 Pet. 2:13–17).

Regardless of our political opinions, we cannot dismiss these relevant truths—especially in our day, when it is so easy to spout off on social media. I know I've been tempted and guilty too often.

Obey Scripture Supremely: One caveat is found in Acts 4:19-20, where the apostles could not obey the command of the Jewish leaders to stop preaching the gospel. Peter and John stated, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge." When the government requires us to

disobey clear teachings of Scripture, we must respectfully decline, whatever the cost.

Utilize Legal Avenues Necessarily: There are admittedly some rather gray areas, like pursuing one's legal case through the court system, writing letters/emails to legislators, etc. (See 1 Cor. 6:1-11 for guidance about lawsuits between believers.) Some of these actions do not seem to be prohibited by Scripture as long as one's attitude and approach honors Christ. Certainly, we should exercise the privilege of voting.

A Biblical Attitude

As we conclude, I see two essential attitudes emphasized in the New Testament.

A Prayerful Confidence in the Gospel

In Acts 4:18-31 we see the first moments of persecution against the early Christians and find a powerful example for our responses today. The church appealed to God in Scripture-fed, Spirit-led, worship-based prayer as they gathered in united response. They affirmed that God knew their situation. They claimed the truths of the word and asked for a greater Spirit-filled boldness to continue to boldly preach the gospel. Whatever the cost, we cannot be silent about the glory and goodness of the gospel. To compromise the message of the cross would be like withholding the only available cure from a terminally sick patient.

A Christlike Trust in Ultimate Justice

Returning to Peter's guidance for persecuted Christians, we find a powerful challenge to walk in the steps of Jesus, who suffered unjustly for us. Peter says, "He committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, he did not revile back; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but he entrusted Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:22-23). Jesus—not some political pundit or social

activist—is our example. As I often say, “The scoreboard is in heaven.” Our earthly journey is rife with temporal wins and losses, personally and politically. But God keeps score, and His justice will be perfect and final. Thus, we continually trust Him in our approach and attitude.

So, as you try to make sense of our culture of protest, I commend you to your own evaluation of the New Testament in hopes that my words have challenged you. In all things let us follow Jesus, adorn His gospel and live with deep trust that we have a great and just God who superintends the affairs of all people and nations—even when the nuances of the present society don’t make a lot of sense.

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