

THEREFORE...

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12:1

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Faith Anchors: Reflections on Terrorism and the Ways of God

The following text is adapted from recent reports of the Christian Life Commission to annual meetings of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Like other national tragedies, the terrorist attacks on the United States mark a permanent date in American history. From now on, the eleventh day of September is etched in our collective memory.

The first anniversary of September 11 has come and gone, and the raw emotions evoked by the attacks have given way to other emotions and concerns. We are concerned about subsequent terrorist attacks, about imminent and future military campaigns, about the economy, and about all of the people impacted by all of the above. As we try to cope with these and other concerns, Christians need to hold fast to important anchors of our faith which can sustain us through the present crisis: *justice, religious liberty, and the faithfulness of God.*

Justice

One anchor is *justice*. The word for justice in the Old Testament is the Hebrew term *mishpat*, which fundamentally means “after the former manner.” Joshua 6:15 says, “On the seventh day they rose early, at dawn, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times.” The phrase “in the same manner” translates *mishpat*, which came to mean God’s manner of doing things. Jeremiah bemoaned the ignorance of the people saying, “they do not know the way [*mishpat*]

of the LORD” (Jer.5:4). In scripture, justice has three inseparable faces: the way of God in balancing the universe, the saving work of God in championing the disenfranchised, and the judging work of God in resisting the oppressor.

Balancing the Universe

In one sense, justice is the way God rules the universe and acts toward the creation:

*Who has measured the waters in the hollow
of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a
span, . . . ?*

*Who has directed the spirit of the LORD,
or as his counselor has instructed him?
Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,
and who taught him the path of justice
[*mishpat*]?*

*Who taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of
understanding?*

*Even the nations are like a drop from a
bucket; . . .*

*see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.
(Isa. 40:12-14)*

To all of Isaiah's rhetorical questions, the obvious answer is, "There is no one like Yahweh!" This weighing, measuring, and balancing of the universe, proportioning it so that it holds together, epitomizes the justice of God. Jeremiah observes,

*Even the stork in the heavens
knows its times;
and the turtledove, swallow, and crane
observe the time of their coming;
but my people do not know
the ordinance [mishpat] of the LORD.
(Jer. 8:7)*

The irony that even the animals understand what humans have forgotten is not lost on the prophet. In its biblical essence, justice is God's determination to put everything in its rightful place, so ordering the whole according to God's sense of balance and harmony.

Championing the Disenfranchised

In another sense, God's justice works to reclaim, restore, and to save us from the disorder and chaos of our existence. Specifically, this redemptive aim of *mishpat* is applied in the Old Testament to the disenfranchised of Hebrew society:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice [mishpat] for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:17-19)

According to scripture, a central element of God's determination to reorder the chaos of human existence is never to tire of hearing the cries of the widow, the orphan, and stranger. Over and over, scripture affirms that justice is the habit of God to remember those whom the world has forgotten, to champion those who have no champion, to advocate for those whose circumstances in life make them vulnerable.

Literally dozens of passages could be cited at this point. Psalm 146 says,

*Happy are those whose help is the God of
Jacob, . . .
who executes justice [mishpat] for the
oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry. . . .
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed
down; . . .
The LORD watches over the strangers;*

*he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to
ruin. (Ps. 146:5-9)*

This sense of divine justice flows seamlessly from the Old to the New Testament. In word and deed, Jesus is the very incarnation of justice. He feeds the hungry, heals the sick, welcomes the outcast, forgives the sinner, redeems the lost. According to the parable of the last judgment, Jesus so identifies with the most vulnerable people in society that whenever we minister to the "least of these," we minister to Jesus himself (Matt. 25:31f). The church is depicted as the visible presence of the Reign of God in the world, helping the widow, feeding the hungry, welcoming the outcast.

Judging the Oppressor

In still another sense, the justice of God acts in behalf of the weak by actively resisting and restraining the oppressor. Those who oppress the weak incur the wrath of God. The prophets bear clear witness to this face of divine justice:

*For scoundrels are found among my people;
they take over the goods of others.
Like fowlers they set a trap;
they catch human beings. . . .
They know no limits in deeds of
wickedness;
they do not judge with justice [mishpat]
the cause of the orphan, to make it
prosper,
and they do not defend the rights of the
needy.
Shall I not punish them for these things?
(Jer. 5:26-28)*

God's practice of justice is the model and motive for our practice. Because God does *mishpat* for us, we are instructed to do *mishpat* for others. Those who ignore God's justice and oppress the weak will answer to God, who will mete out justice as judgment:

*You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien,
for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You
shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do
abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will
surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I
will kill you with the sword, . . . And if your
neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am
compassionate. (Ex. 22:21-27)*

In summary, the Bible describes God's justice in these primary ways: *balancing*—holding the universe together according to God's purposes, *saving*—

restoring God's intended order with special focus on the disenfranchised, and *judging*—actively resisting the oppressor and the wrongdoer.

Justice versus Vengeance

As Christians ask for justice in the face of terrorism, we ought to be clear about what we are asking for. At the very least, we should understand and communicate that justice is not the same as vengeance. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his followers to move beyond even the law of limited revenge allowed by the Old Testament:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evil-doer. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if any one wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to anyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."
(Matt. 5:38-42)

Distinct from vengeance, the judging side of justice resists the oppressor with the intention of turning the oppressor toward God. Clearly this was the intention of the prophets' invectives against Israel's injustices. In lambasting her sins and warning her of impending destruction, the prophets hoped against hope for Israel's redemption. This is to say the justice of God is really one thing: God's ruling and holding together the universe in a manner which reflects God's faithfulness, love, and grace. The other important biblical expressions of justice—God's championing the disenfranchised and judging the oppressor—are occasioned by injustice itself. Oppressors violate the justice of God, and God responds to the cries of the oppressed. Vengeance is about payback, but the judging side of justice is about restoring the ways of God. The perpetrators of injustice may so resist justice that they incur their own destruction, but this tragic outcome is far from God's intention. As we seek justice in the wake of terrorism, we can lay claim to no other justice than that which is revealed in scripture and embodied in Jesus.

Justice and Warfare

Jesus' teaching to love the enemy and his faithful acceptance of the cross rather than the sword as God's way of establishing the Kingdom have rightly moved Christians across the ages to think deeply about the relationship between following Jesus and participating in war. This is the case with all wars, including the prospective war with Iraq and other

campaigns aimed against terrorism. One path among several that Christians have followed in this regard is the just war tradition, which historically emerged to deal with the apparent incompatibility between war and Christian discipleship. In the Christian theological context, other paths have included the pacifist tradition, the holy war tradition, and variations of each. As the following brief historical account will begin to show, the just war tradition emerged over the centuries as a widely used vehicle for thinking about the relationship between Christian discipleship and war.

Historical Perspectives

As a marginalized and misunderstood minority within the Roman Empire, the early Christians believed that following Jesus meant refusing to participate in warfare. In the early third century, Tertullian opposed Christians' service in the Roman army because soldiers were forced to take part in pagan sacrifices and to carry out executions.

After Constantine became the first pro-Christian emperor in 312, he and most of his successors employed imperial power in their attempt to establish Christianity as a unifying societal force. This strategy included both waging war against enemies of the empire and using violence to quell the intense theological disputes that afflicted the church during the fourth and fifth centuries. In 396, Augustine explicitly rejected the use of force against heretics, but twelve years later, after bitter battles with the Donatists, he changed his mind and welcomed Roman force to restore social order. Out of this painful experience and personal struggle over the use of force, Augustine worked out his own definition of "just war." Over the centuries the just war tradition was integrated into Catholic moral theology and specifically into the influential teachings of Thomas Aquinas.

Because the sixteenth-century Reformers depended so heavily on the military support of local rulers for their survival, just war tradition became especially important to Protestant churches and is affirmed in historic official documents of several groups, including Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Anglicans. Also in the early sixteenth century, the first Anabaptists overwhelmingly opposed Christians' involvement in war, including the prevailing definitions of "just war." The Anabaptists were convinced that Jesus' life and teachings directed his followers away from the use of violence and that following Jesus was the central act of Christian discipleship.

About the same time, Machiavelli articulated the pragmatic view that war could be justified simply in the self-interest of the ruler without deference to Christian morality. Eventually this view evolved into justification of war in the self-interest of the nation-state.

Just War Tradition

Just war tradition seeks to distinguish itself both from pragmatic, national-interest approaches to war as well as from the holy-war tradition so evident in the crusades and the incessant religious wars which blighted Europe during the medieval and reformation eras. Like Christian pacifism, just war tradition considers war an evil but unlike pacifism which rejects war in principle, just war teaching makes the claim that under specific circumstances war might be less evil than the evil which it confronts. In its essence, just war tradition recognizes a set of criteria which are calculated to provide objectivity and clarity in determining when war is justifiable. The simplest statement of these criteria which have emerged through the tradition is as follows:

1. The war must be waged by legitimate authorities.
2. The cause being fought for must be just, such as defense against an aggressor.
3. The ultimate goal or intention must be peace.
4. The subjective motivation or intention must not be hatred or vengeance.
5. War must be the last resort.
6. Success must be probable.
7. The means must be indispensable to achieve the end.
8. The means used must be proportional, that is, causing no more harm than they prevent.
9. Harm to civilians and defenseless enemies must be avoided.
10. The means must respect the provisions of international law.

At least from the standpoint of original just war thinkers like Augustine, the satisfaction of just war criteria never made war *just*, only *justifiable*. As a violation of the way of Jesus, war in their thinking was always lamentable and the lesser of evils, never truly a positive good. This overriding conviction is crucial, for it differentiates just war tradition from both the national-interest and holy-war approaches which interpret war as unapologetically mandated by the needs of the nation or by the command of the deity.

Just war tradition has not only been important in the history of Christian thought but also has embedded itself in a number of international laws,

treaties, and codes of military conduct. The tradition has thus come to serve at least in part as a language of moral discourse about war in the larger society. As Christians struggle with the morality of launching a military campaign against Iraq, one way to work through this issue is to ask how the present situation does or does not satisfy just war criteria.

Applying the Tradition

First, are the authorities legitimate? Traditionally, the approval of Congress provides legitimacy, but many Americans wish in this case for a multi-national consensus as a prerequisite for military action.

Second, is the cause just? The argument has been made that if Iraq has amassed and is preparing to deploy weapons of mass destruction, military action to remove these weapons is analogous to a domestic police action against terrorists within the U.S. This argument could be substantive if the military action were in fact multi-national and clear proof were offered for the existence of weapons of mass destruction.

Third, while the apparent goal of military action is peace, it is certainly valid to ask whether the action, if successful, would in fact lead to peace in the Middle East and elsewhere. Most analysts, for example, believe that the first war on Iraq precipitated terrorist acts directed against Americans inside and outside the U.S. Peace must be both an immediate and a long-term goal.

Fourth, we hope and might assume that the motive is not hatred or revenge. Motives can only be discerned through statements and actions, and as the administration moves to garner national and international support for the campaign, there is a predictable tendency to portray the enemy in the darkest possible terms. While this portrayal may be well-deserved, the line between negative characterization and hatred is often narrow and easily crossed.

Fifth, it is important to determine whether or not military action is in fact the last resort. If weapons of mass destruction exist, can they be removed by means other than war? Have we exhausted every other viable option? Many observers contend, for example, that if the Iraqis allow unrestricted international inspections, the "last resort" criterion would demand that such inspections be pursued prior to military action.

Sixth, it is important to appreciate that assessing the probability of success is *not* in this context a pragmatic calculation but a *theological distinction* of just war tradition. Holy warriors go into

battle under the belief that they are divinely called to wage war whether they succeed or not. Indeed, the reward of becoming a casualty of holy war is martyrdom. Since just war tradition understands war to be an evil regrettably necessitated by a greater evil, the calculation of probable success is paramount and necessary in order to construe war as justifiable, i.e., as capable of subduing the greater evil.

The seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth criteria circumscribe the conduct of just war. History repeatedly shows that even when careful attention is given to the first six criteria depicting justifiable entry into war, the actual conduct of war easily slips into national-interest or holy-war thinking. Unnecessary violence is perpetrated, proportionality is violated, noncombatants are avoidably killed, and international rules of engagement are broken in virtually every war, however initially justified. If we depend on just war tradition to justify entry into combat, integrity demands that we use the same tradition to guide the conduct of the campaign.

Just war tradition, like other forms of serious Christian reflection regarding war and peace, is not in the end a means to justify war, but to avoid war if at all possible. We who believe Jesus to be God's very Word and who have answered the call to follow him understand that the burden of proof is always on those who would use violence. The Baptist Faith and Message puts it well:

It is the duty of Christians to seek peace with all men on principles of righteousness. In accordance with the spirit and teachings of Christ, they should do all in their power to put an end to war. The true remedy for the war spirit is the gospel of our Lord.

Religious Liberty

Another faith anchor is *religious liberty*. Because of both our history of suffering persecution and our understanding of faith as voluntary, Baptists cherish religious liberty. Baptists were instrumental in the drafting and passage of the religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment which guarantee religious liberty through separation of church and state. The First Amendment stipulates that government cannot establish religion or restrict the free exercise of religion. Historically, the religious liberty clauses have meant that government must be neutral toward religion, sponsoring neither belief nor unbelief, and must not restrict religious practice unless it has a compelling reason to do so. In prohibiting government from establishing religion or interfering with religious practice, these constitutional guarantees

do not prohibit citizens from influencing public policies on religious grounds or from bearing witness to their faith in the public square so long as these activities do not impair the religious liberty of others.

When first passed into law, the religious freedom clauses were *experimental* because they marked a radical departure from centuries of state-sponsored religion, not just in Europe, but around the globe. In this distinctively American experiment, religion is left to flourish or flounder on its own, without government support or interference. During the past two hundred years, religion has in fact flourished. Today, literally thousands of identifiable religious groups co-exist in the U.S. Each group is freely supported by adherents who are both free to practice their faith and witness to others.

Baptists should hold on to the anchor of religious liberty especially in the face of terrorism because religious liberty names an important way we are different from the terrorists. We champion a free society in which people are free to believe, to disbelieve, and to act accordingly. The terrorists champion a society in which *their* particular form of religious belief is coerced and strictly enforced.

In the end these starkly disparate societal visions have proven tragic because the terrorists purportedly believe that killing an American is tantamount to killing an infidel. Because Americans live in freedom, we are free to sin so long as our sinning does not violate the laws of the land. In societies which the terrorists most value, religion and state are merged, and religious violations evoke government-sanctioned, violent retribution. The terrorists regard America as evil in part because our refusal to merge religion and state makes us appear to be hopelessly secular and indifferent to sin.

Our response to terrorism should not be to blame ourselves and others for the negative fruits of freedom, but to hang onto the anchor of religious liberty with all of our collective might. Constitutionally guaranteed religious liberty may be messy, but this distinctively American system has allowed religious faith to thrive. We should vigilantly protect *everyone's* freedom, foster mutual respect and understanding between religious groups, and guard against every form of religiously motivated bigotry. We should resist all attempts to equate Islam with terrorism, befriend Muslims in our communities, and effectively protect Muslims and their places of worship from violence. We must also remember that while religious repression and coercion may be effective in suppressing outward behaviors, only God can change our hearts and minds.

The Faithfulness of God

The anxiety induced by terrorism tends to rob us of a clear sense of God's presence. Driven by fear instead of hope, we drift toward pessimism and cynicism. Shaken by the specter of continuing terrorist attacks, we feel weak and vulnerable. In the midst of these feelings, we would do well to remember that terrorism is not the first and last threat against us. We have long been threatened by large arsenals of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction which could not only fall into the hands of terrorists, but also be deployed by legitimate governments. We are also threatened by hunger, poverty, economic injustice, environmental degradation, political oppression, racial and ethnic bigotry, economic recession, unemployment, and crime. Even if the immediate threat of terrorism is removed, these threats remain. Indeed, many of these threats constitute the seedbed of present and future terrorism.

In the face of every threat, our challenge is to remember that God is ever at work upholding the integrity of creation and crafting redemption against the tragic consequences of human sin. This

remembering constitutes a third faith anchor, *the faithfulness of God*, which phrase suggests all of God's wonderful ways among us.

God is faithful to see us through every trial even though we cannot know every outcome. God is faithful to do justice among us even though the disparities between our justice and God's justice may take us by surprise. God is faithful to love us unconditionally even though we have done nothing to merit such love. God is faithful to forgive us even though our need for forgiveness is unending. God is faithful to guide our paths even though we can only see one or two steps ahead. God is faithful to give us courage even though we are plagued by fear. God is faithful to move us on even though we are slowed by anxiety. God is faithful to gather us in community even though we languish in isolation. God is faithful to use us for good even though we are a people of little faith. Like the Psalmist, we trust God, our refuge and strength:

*The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
(Psalm 46:11)*

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