

Doesn't Religion Cause Violence?

Michael Allen

Confronting Christianity / Apologetics

Introduction

On July 15, 1099 AD, something in the neighborhood of 10,000 Christian Crusaders broke through the walls of the holy city of Jerusalem. Fighting and killing anyone who resisted, they made their way to Haram al-Sharif, home to their target, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is the third holiest site in all the religion of Islam. Haram al-Sharif is home to the Golden Dome, which features prominently in movies, on postcards, and the like. You've probably seen it.

When they arrived at the mosque, crowded inside were thousands of Muslims and their families. The self-proclaimed "pilgrims" got themselves stirred up into a frenzy after two years on the road and slaughtered every man, woman, and child in the mosque. They threw some of them over the 213 ft. high walls of the plaza, and they followed and killed any who ran to the roof of the mosque.

In writing of the massacre, one of the leaders of the crusade, Raymond of Aguilers, wrote: "Wonderful sights were to be seen. Some of our men cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands, and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city...."

As the Crusaders were marching towards Jerusalem, a monk known as Peter the Hermit violently attacked and slaughtered Jewish communities. Jews who lived in Jerusalem upon arrival of the Crusaders were also killed, often being burned alive in their synagogues. If you're anything like me, and I'm sure some of you are, learning about this behavior from individuals claiming the blessing of Christ, the "divine mandate of God", has caused you to question the reality of Christianity's claims. Maybe, in fact, you are still sitting there, wondering how those of us who are here worshipping the God of the Bible could believe in such a violent God.

The belief that religion causes violence is a common frustration with faith broadly, and especially with Christianity and Islam. Dave talked a few weeks ago about Christianity being viewed (incorrectly) as the "white man's religion", and our cultural and social consciousness intimately connect the tenets of Christian faith with things like imperialism, forced conversion, mass graves of children. It would be unwise, unhelpful, and untrue for us as believers to shrug off these heartbreaking realities. We can't claim the universal "we" in regard to the social good that Christianity has brought into the world (which is much) and disregard the social ills.

And Christianity is not the only religion that has incredibly painful violence in its past. Buddhism, often romanticized, along with other Eastern religions, as being a bastion for peaceful philosophies, has seen slaughters perpetrated by its believers, with one of the most visible happening in Myanmar, a country near and dear to our congregation. Islam, the same. Shinto, the same. Judaism, the same. And it becomes easy for us to say "oh well those aren't *real* Christians or Muslims or Buddhists. They are just using those religions to get a foothold of power socially or institutionally." Certainly, that may be the case, but you

can't know that, and to state as such is actually a logical fallacy. Far more likely is what Christians know to be the state of every human on this side of eternity: sin infects us all. But those are just some of the religions that have seen atrocities carried out in their name, what about those who don't hold to religious or spiritual beliefs? Karl Marx envisioned a world without religion, where all would be seen as equal and justice would be equitable. He looked around, saw that Christianity wasn't achieving its claims, and sought a universal justice. If you know anything about how what has come to be called "Marxism" has played out over the past century, you know that some of the worst atrocities in recent history come from a movement that is, at its foundation, *anti*-religion. So, does religion cause violence? Perhaps, but you would be hard pressed to demonstrate that it causes violence at a greater rate than those who don't claim a faith of any kind. So simply removing religion from the equation doesn't solve our violence issue.

So, if the religious *and* the atheist/un-religious are violent in different but still consistent patterns, how are we to respond to this question? How do we communicate what the Christian faith believes regarding violence? What *does* the Christian faith believe? What does scripture say about violence?

There are two points I want you to walk away with today. Christianity is a faith built on a *radical truth* containing an act of *radical mercy*. The model those of the Christian faith claim for their lives is one of *radical truth* containing an act of *radical mercy*. And we are called to live according to this reality. We are called to live a life of *radical mercy because of this radical truth*.

Point #1 – Christianity is built on a radical truth containing an act of radical mercy

If you've been around church for any period, you've undoubtedly already heard about this truth, but I want us to consider in light of this question of Christianity's interaction with violence. So, let's provide a rapid overview of our faith foundations.

We believe that we exist as sinful creatures.

[1 John 1:8](#) - (NIV) - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

We believe our sin separates us from God.

[Isaiah 59:2](#) - (NIV) - But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

This serves as the foundation of the Jewish faith and the Mosaic Covenant and Levitical Law that was given in an attempt to live according to God's purposes for His creation. In order to account for their sin nature, a sacrificial system was put into place that served as a precursor for the final sacrifice. God Himself provided that sacrifice in the form of His Son Jesus, the Christ Messiah.

[Philippians 2:5-11](#) - (NIV) - In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Jesus, who was in very nature God, made Himself a servant to those who would later reject and kill him. He pursued the plan of salvation all the way through to the end, eventually

being killed via crucifixion. But he wasn't *just* crucified. He was tortured. He was mocked. He was beaten. All while being innocent of any legal charges. They took an innocent man and attempted to humiliate Him through the preparation for and completion of capital punishment.

Luke 22, starting in verse 63 says "...the men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophesy! Who hit you?" This was happening before he was even brought into the sham trial!

It's important to understand, Jesus went through this willingly. When the religious leaders and their servants had come to arrest him, one of Jesus' disciples lashed out and cut off one of the servants' ears. Jesus, in response, didn't egg him on, didn't say "yes! Protect me!" but said "no more of this" and *healed the man whose ear was cut off*. At every moment of Jesus' life, we see him subverting our prideful human nature and our desire to *dominate via power*.

Jesus was being beaten and mocked before trial began. Then the trial starts, and Jesus doesn't respond in ways that anyone is expecting. Truly, you could say he was effectively "pleading the fifth" while also continuing to try and open the eyes of those accusing him, sermonizing, if you will. The Jewish leaders find him (untruthfully) guilty and pass him along to Pilate, who passes him to Herod, who passes him *back* to Pilate. He was found innocent by both Herod and Pilate, and Pilate said that Jesus would be punished and set free.

And we see in the Gospel of John that Pilate was not *kind* to Jesus when punishing him. A precursor to crucifixion was the act of being flogged - Jesus was struck repeatedly with a whip on his back. Despite being told he wasn't worthy of capital punishment, they whipped him *anyways*. And then, to add further insult *and* injury, they twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. I wouldn't imagine that they were gentle, or reverent about such an action.

The religious rulers stirred up the crowd they had formed, in response to Pilate saying he was going to set him free.

[Luke 23:20-21](#) - (NIV) - "Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'"

They wanted him executed in the most painful way humans have ever figured out. Pilate says, for a third time, there are no grounds for the death penalty. And, starting in verse 23: "But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will."

They then made Jesus carry the very cross that would hold him to Golgotha, the place of the skull. And it was there, between two criminals, Jesus was nailed through his body, and hung, on a cross, where he would die a slow, painful death of asphyxiation. While dying, Jesus was still praying for those who were executing him, receiving sneers, mocking, and insults in return from the crowd. After he died, one of the Roman guards pierced his side with a spear, likely to confirm that Jesus was, in fact, dead.

Central to the gathering of the believers in the faith called Christianity is the brutal, painful crucifixion of Jesus the Christ Messiah. After living a sinless life, being found and declared innocent multiple times, he submitted himself to the most painful death imaginable, because God's plan was always to take from us the expectation of saving ourselves. Jesus submitted himself to the extreme act of violence in order to achieve salvation for us. That's the act of *radical mercy* contained in the radical truth - our God took the weight of our sins and lifted the weight from us so that we would be saved through faith alone, should we

desire it. “For by grace you have been saved, through faith.” (Eph 2:8) No longer does the weight of sin have to weigh you down and leave you without hope, because that’s not the end of the story, nor the fullness of the *radical truth* of Christianity.

“Violence is the use of power by the strong to hurt the weak” Dr. McLaughlin writes in this book. “At the cross” she writes, “the most powerful man who ever lived submitted to the most brutal death ever died, to save the powerless. Christianity does not glorify violence. It humiliates it.” Because the fullness of the radical truth of Christianity also incorporates this incredible, miraculous working of God’s power three days later. Violence ended Jesus’ life, and then Jesus overcame the grave and the consequence of sin, which is death, in a declaration that sin and violence is not our ruler. Violence is not stronger than our God. We can stand here, victorious, and not fear physical ills not *just* because God came down in human form and took up a cross and endured our punishment, but because the *radical truth* of Christianity is that He did all that and then he came back, resurrected!

“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Rom 10:9)

The radical truth of Christianity is this: our God condescended into human form, took on the life of a sinless servant, bore the weight of our punishment on the cross, and laughed (metaphorically) in the face of death and the grave in a demonstration of his total control over everything. We don’t stand in death anymore, we stand in resurrection power, boasting in the cross and the freedom it can provide for us. The radical mercy of our creator was such that we can live a life filled with joy and hopeful expectation.

But we don’t stop there. We don’t stop at knowledge or hope. Christianity is a faith built on a radical truth containing that act of radical mercy, and we are called to live a life of radical mercy *because of* that radical truth!

Point #2 – We are called to live a life of radical mercy because of this radical truth

I firmly believe that anyone who is grounded and rooted in their faith in Jesus, anyone who understands the depth of His mercy towards us and truly desires to imitate it as we’re called to, will be diametrically opposed to violence. *Even in the Old Testament God is shown as wanting us to avoid violence.*

[Psalm 11:5](#) - (NIV) - The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion.

[Proverbs 3:31](#) - (NIV) - Do not envy the violent or choose any of their ways.

[Jeremiah 22:3](#) - (NIV) - This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

[Micah 6:8](#) - (NIV) - He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

So, if we align ourselves with God’s heart we should hate violence and love mercy! Mercy and violence cannot co-exist.

In His sermon on the mount, Jesus took the sixth commandment, which says, “You shall not murder” and he says this:

[Matthew 5:21-22](#) - (NIV) - “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone

who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

So not only are we to be opposed to violence, but Jesus even redefines violence by saying being *angry* at a brother or sister is equivalent to murdering them. Talk about being violent! You might have heard it said that Jesus is being hyperbolic here, and you're right, he is. But He's not using hyperbole to give us a justification to *not do the thing he's being hyperbolic about*. He's not saying "oh, it's *so impossible* to live within the kingdom of God that you shouldn't even try".

So, let me ask, how many of you can honestly say you've never gotten upset with someone before, that you've never gotten angry? How many of you have come to church, and worshipped God whole-heartedly, maybe giving your tithe, offering your talents to the Lord, while harboring bitterness and anger with a brother or sister, or while you know a brother or sister is not right with you? Do you know that Jesus calls *us, me, you* to take the first step in seeking reconciliation, even if it's undeserved? Our calling is to be filled with mercy, to seek to bless those who wish to harm us, those who have been unfair or unkind or unjust to us, because *He* had mercy on us, first.

[Romans 12:17-21](#) - (NIV) - Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Paul is quoting Proverbs in this passage, did you know that? [Proverbs 25:21-22](#). And heaping burning coals on their head isn't talking about how doing this actually still hurts the person, he's not promoting passive aggressive, covert violence. Carrying burning coals on one's head is a sign of repentance in ancient Egypt! Have *radical mercy* on those who would harm you and watch how the Lord works in them.

Does this sound like a call to be violent with those around you? Does this sound like a call to yell at or be angry with your coworker, boss, or employee when they mess something up at work, or make your life difficult?

Does this sound like a call to storm the capitol building because of the results of an election?

How about laying on the horn when someone cuts you off in traffic (which I'm sure you've definitely never done and you absolutely weren't speeding anyways)?

When someone insults you or offends you, do you respond with gentleness, or do you puff out your chest and talk about how big you are, how smart you are, how good you are, how Christian you are?

Do you realize that Jesus is telling us that when we get angry at our parents, siblings, children, friends, we're *actively being violent towards them*? And how does God feel about those who love violence? He hates them!

[1 Peter 2:20-22](#) - (NIV) - But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

How many of you would rather fight back if you're being attacked for doing the right thing? Honestly? "I don't back down from a fight, my parents didn't raise a quitter. When you are mistreated, isn't it *just* and *fair* to fight back? Isn't it deserved? Proportionally, of course!" It may be "just" and "fair" from a human perspective, but what does scripture say? Scripture says that we should follow the example of Christ, who's *radical mercy gave us a radical truth*. We are to avoid repaying *anyone* with violence. We are to strive for peace with *everyone*. Does that describe how you live your life? Would your children or friends say that's the character traits you exhibit?

Mercy is refusing to punish for something deserving punishment. It's forgiving when it is neither sought nor deserved. It's saying, "I would be wholly justified to treat you this way, but I am intentionally choosing to not."

Our faith is a faith of *radical mercy*. We don't repay *anyone* for what they've done. "But it's just how life works." Are we called to holiness or pragmatism? "But they started it!" Christ finished it.

Conclusion

The actions of those who participated in the Crusades were without Biblical grounding. They acted in a way that was directly contrary to scriptural teaching. They did not exemplify the *radical mercy* that is a tenet of our faith. As to whether the Crusades were *necessary or appropriate* is still yet another conversation we don't have time for, but I'll remind you of two key components of the Crusades that are oft forgotten when having conversations regarding them: we lost the Crusades, badly. They were not an uplifting of Christian might, by any means. Second, the Crusades were begun in response to a plea for help from Jerusalem to the Church in Rome as invading armies were attempting to take over.

Now, we often forget that most people who are wrestling with or against the Christian faith don't know our scriptures well, if at all. But they see you. They see Christians in the world at large, in the news, at work, at restaurants, in politics, etc. So, if the popular consensus is that Christians are violent, it's likely because that's what they've *seen* Christians be. We've spent the last two months in our youth group talking about how and why we are called to value others above ourselves, as it says in Philippians. One of the passages we discussed was in Matthew chapter 5, the Salt and Light verses in His sermon on the mount. People should see something different when they see you, your actions should tell a different story. Do you look different than those around you, because of Christ? Or do you look just like the rest of the world, but with an "I love Jesus" bumper sticker?

I want to leave you with this story of a pastor in a country where the church is dealing with persecution.

On December 9, 2018, over 100 members of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, China, were arrested. Among them was the senior pastor Wang Yi and his wife Jiang Rong. Foreseeing this possibility, he had written a declaration to be published should he be held longer than 48 hours. He describes what he calls "faithful disobedience", and he finds it to be different in substance than political activism or civil disobedience.

It's a long declaration, and I recommend reading it in full if you have time. He writes of joyfully accepting the reality of the Chinese government over him, and his desire is not to change the institutions in China's government. I want to read in full two specific paragraphs.

“Regardless of what crime the government charges me with, whatever filth they fling at me, as long as this charge is related to my faith, my writings, my comments, and my teachings, it is merely a lie and temptation of demons. I categorically deny it. I will serve my sentence, but I will not serve the law. I will be executed, but I will not plead guilty.”

Later, in describing faithful disobedience, Wang Yi writes of two boundaries that he feels must not be overstepped:

“The second boundary is that of behavior. The gospel demands that disobedience of faith must be non-violent. The mystery of the gospel lies in actively suffering, even being willing to endure unrighteous punishment, as a substitute for physical resistance. Peaceful disobedience is the result of love and forgiveness. The cross means being willing to suffer when one does not have to suffer. For Christ had limitless ability to fight back, yet he endured all of the humility and hurt. The way that Christ resisted the world that resisted him was by extending an olive branch of peace on the cross to the world that crucified him.”

Wang Yi was in prison for a year, and was finally tried on December 26, 2019. 4 days later, he was sentenced to 9 years of criminal detention. This is the longest house sentence that has ever been given to a house pastor. I offer one final quote for you, this time from Early Rain Covenant Church in response to the sentencing.

“In Christ, we issue the following exhortation and protest against Pastor Wang Yi’s severe sentence. Do you government officials not know that this is a sin against God? Do you not know that this is an abuse of your authority ([Rom. 13:3](#))? Even so, we do not hate you. On the contrary, our merciful and righteous God wants us to love you and to pray for you. We desire that those public officials and law enforcement officers who are involved in this case would quickly repent and believe in the Lord, that you would know the atonement and forgiveness of sins which the Lord Jesus extends to all through his suffering on the cross, and that you would obtain eternal life and hope.”

I’ll be honest, historically and recently, the church has made a number of poor decisions, and we’ve seen believers do horrendous evils. This is not unique to those who have faith, let alone a Christian faith, but it must be understood and recognized for what it is - sin. We also have the blessing of charities, hospitals, orphanages, and countless lineages that would not exist today if not for the early saints in the church. This doesn’t diminish the brutal, heartbreaking reality of our mistakes and our violence.

Friends, brothers, sisters, we are called to a faith of radical mercy built on a radical truth. Doesn’t religion cause violence? It certainly can be wielded as a justification for violence, but I believe in the core of my being that Christians are called to look different than an already violent world. I’m not saying you can’t defend others, I’m not saying it’s wrong to be in the military, but I am saying that if you are going to pursue violence you should do so cautiously, understanding that every action you perform is a representation of the God who had radical mercy on you, and that one of the most incredible witnesses we have is to be peaceful in all situations. Let us look to the model in pastors such as Wang Yi and Early Rain Covenant Church as examples. Let us look to the model we find in Paul, imprisoned multiple times but always joyful. Let us look ultimately to the model of Christ, who had every ability and power to stop the violence and pain and suffering that was thrust upon him, but instead endured in an act of radical mercy to give us a radical truth.