
GOD'S STRATEGY IS LOVE



The world has been through a rough patch lately—but I don't have to tell you that. Fires in Australia. Tsunamis in Japan. Record heat in multiple nations around the globe. A pandemic in all of them. Civil unrest. Domestic terrorism. Economic stress. Resource depletion. Distrust of government. Political divisions that just seem to keep getting worse.

Fear and hate are on the rise. People are scared of all these threats coming at them from multiple directions. When people get scared, they dig in their

The Point: The essential power of the gospel is love, not force, and whenever Christians try to use force to accomplish Christ's work, they inevitably betray the very One they are trying to serve.

heels. They get defensive. They stop listening. They start drawing lines. They start hating. If the process isn't interrupted, eventually they start fighting. People start dying.

It's painfully clear that humanity is not on a good path at the moment. The tension keeps building, year after year. We're heading toward some kind of breaking point—one that either breaks us as a species, or breaks us through to a new and better way of doing life together.

What's also painfully clear is that now more than ever the world *needs* saving. It needs a fresh infusion of true champions—noble-hearted heroes bursting with love—who are willing to lay down their lives for the world to pull it back from the darkness.

As a believer in God, and a follower of Christ, it's equally clear to me that people of faith should be among the first to respond to that Call. The great demand of Christianity has always been to love the world as Christ does, and to lay down your life for it, just as Jesus did. He showed us the way.



A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. — Jesus (John 13:34)

And...

We love because he first loved us. — John the Apostle (1 John 4:19)

Did Jesus love us only when we agreed with him? Did he lay down his life for us only after we got in line with his worldview and valued the same things he did? Not even close. Rather, the Apostle Paul explains,

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

It's this love that Christ has for us that changes the whole story, you see? He dies for us while we are still his enemies, and every one of us who is rescued by his love is called to follow him in doing the same for others.

This “way of love,” of laying down our lives out of love for the world, stands in stark contrast to what poses as Christian devotion in much of the culture today, all of which is built not on love for the world but on fear of it, spewing doctrines of self-protectionism in the name of preserving truth and resisting evil—like a new order of Templar Knights, called to protect the pilgrims in the Holy Land—and so they cry out “God wills it!” as they plunge their swords into the hearts of the Muslims, or the Migrants, or the Gays and Lesbians, or the Poor.

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend.

— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

And yet, these are the very ones Christ calls us to love and lay down our lives for. The heart of the gospel isn't self-protection, but self-sacrifice; not fear, but love. The victory of the Kingdom of God comes not by containing evil by force, but by invading it with love.

God's strategy for winning the world *is love*. Miss this, and you miss the gospel entirely. God means to redeem the world through love, and not through force. This is the very heart of the message of Christ's death and resurrection. This is the core tenant of what it means to be Christian—that we follow our Lord in loving the world, and laying down our lives for it. And who is the world? It is your neighbor. And who is your neighbor? The one who is not like you, the one who has great need to be loved.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and

when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25-37)

BUT WHAT ABOUT DEFENDING THE TRUTH?

*As Polycarp was being taken into the arena, a voice came to him from heaven: “Be strong, Polycarp and play the man!” No one saw who had spoken, but our brothers who were there heard the voice. When the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured, there was an uproar. The Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, “Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, ‘Down with the Atheists!’” Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, “Down with the Atheists!” “Swear,” urged the Proconsul, “reproach Christ, and I will set you free.” “86 years have I served him,” Polycarp declared, “and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*)*

In the early centuries of the Church, long before Constantine legitimized Christianity by making it the favored religion of Rome, Christians were generally despised by both the government and society at large, primarily because they rejected the dominant religious beliefs and practices of their time. Proclaiming Christ as Lord, they refused to recognize Caesar as a god, nor would they sacrifice to the other gods of the Roman pantheon. These “sins” struck the people as acts of arrogant defiance against the gods. The Empire responded to these “atheists” (that is, those who did not believe in the Roman gods) in various ways in those early years, including demanding that Christians sacrifice to the gods—which would be for them an open denial of their faith—or else be killed.

As surprising as it may be for modern Christians to hear, the original Christian response to ongoing oppression from an ungodly authority was not open revolt or violent rebellion, but martyrdom. The early fathers saw Christ’s act of laying down his life for those who hated him not merely as a symbolic gesture meant to inspire, but as a practical example of how to love the world in a

meaningful way, and there was no greater honor attributed to the early Christians than to be able to follow in our Lord's steps by physically dying for the world.

This didn't mean the early Christians sought out martyrdom by willfully taunting authorities or committing acts of violence that insured their own death; no, such ideas were abhorrent to them. Rather, if by living out their true faith, rooted in love, they found themselves condemned to die by decree of an oppressive authority, then they would not resist it, and instead used it as an opportunity to publicly honor Christ, and proclaim their faith in him even more boldly to the world.

Why did they do this? Why not rise up, and revolt against the ungodliness of the Roman Empire? Because Jesus consistently rejected the use of violence or force of any kind as an acceptable way to advance his Kingdom.

"You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38-48)

More than that, he actively promoted the idea of self-sacrifice as foundational to following his ways:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11)

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:12-13)

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. (Luke 9:24)

C. S. Lewis observed that almost all crimes of Christian history have come about when religion is confused with politics. Politics, which always runs by the rules of ungrace, allures us to trade away grace for power, a temptation the church has often been unable to resist.

— PHILIP YANCEY



As a result of teachings like these, the early Church rejected the use of force or violence as a legitimate response to threat or oppression. The only right response, they believed, was peaceful resistance, and this included martyrdom.

This commitment to love-motivated sacrifice continued until the 4th Century A.D., when the Emperor Constantine decriminalized Christianity via the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.), and proclaimed his own faith in Christ. This in turn paved the way for Christianity to become the official state religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Theodosius via the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 A.D. This radical change in the status of Christians meant that those who were once oppressed by the governing authorities had now *become* the governing authorities, and this new power suddenly made the use of force a much more tempting option for those who believed in Christ. After all, if you saw ungodliness flaunted in the city streets, and evil flourishing in direct rebellion against the will of God,

and you had the power to stop it by force, wouldn't you? Shouldn't you?

I'm not sure how clearly the Church recognized it at the time, but the moment we came into political power under Constantine, we faced a major crisis of both belief and practice around what it really means to be Christian. What *ought* the Church do with political power? Can the Church ever use force to impose its beliefs on others? If so, under what circumstances? In what ways? For how long? How does the use of force by followers of Christ line up with Christ's call to love others and lay down our lives for them? How can the use of force ever be in agreement with Christ's example?

Some 46 years after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, in 426 A.D., Saint Augustine of Hippo suggested a response to these questions that would forever change the course of Christian doctrine. He wrote:

They who have waged war in obedience to the divine command, or in conformity with [God's] laws, have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." — Saint Augustine of Hippo (City of God, Chapter 21)

In other words, he said that it is permissible for a Christian to use force against another person so long as the violence is done in service of Divine justice against wicked men. He expounded on the

specifics of this criteria in his book *City of God*, criteria which were then wrestled over and debated by Church leaders for the next thousand years, until at last they adopted a set of official guidelines for when and in what limited ways force or violence may be used by followers of Christ, particularly as it applies to “Just War”—a term that Saint Augustine coined.

This “Just War Doctrine” is an interesting study, and if you want to take a deeper look at it you can find a more thorough description [here](#). For the sake of brevity, I’ll include only the major points:

1. The Right to Go to War (*jus ad bellum*)—includes six criteria:

- ❖ Just Cause (innocent life must be at stake)
- ❖ Comparative Justice (injustice suffered by one party must significantly outweigh injustice suffered by the other)
- ❖ Competent Authority (the violence may only be employed by a legitimate political authority)
- ❖ Right Intention (the use of force must be to save lives or promote justice, not to kill or inflict revenge)
- ❖ Probability of Success (the proposed action must be highly likely to accomplish its intended goal)
- ❖ Last Resort (the use of violence may only be employed as a means of last resort)

The Church maintained that in order for violence to be justified, all six criteria must be met. If only a single factor is missing, then the use of force is not justified. But even if all six criteria are met, there are still several criteria for how true servants of God ought to act within a war or other violent situation:

2. The Rights Within War (*jus in bello*)—includes five criteria:

- ❖ Clear Distinction must be made between enemy combatants and non-enemy combatants—that is, no attacking civilians or civilian targets, or even disabled or unarmed enemy combatants.
- ❖ Proportionality in attack must be maintained—minimizing the use of force as much as possible while still being able to achieve victory.
- ❖ There must be a clear military necessity for each act of violence, avoiding any aggression that doesn’t directly contribute to the defeat of the enemy.
- ❖ There must be fair, humane treatment of prisoners of war.
- ❖ No means that are “malum en se” (that is, “evil in themselves”) may be employed. This would include things like torture, mass rape, forcing captured enemy combatants to fight against their own people, and the like.

I appreciate the depth of care and obvious wrestling that went into crafting these guidelines. I have no doubt that the world would be better off if every government on earth abided by these rules. Even so, I cannot help but wonder what Polycarp, or any of the early fathers of our faith, would have to say about this doctrine of “just war,” and the deeper implications it carries about the “right” for Christians to use force to advance God’s cause in society at large.

Personally, I believe these “Just War” guidelines are helpful...but only as long as they are offered as an appeal *from* the Church *to* the secular governing authority. But the whole enterprise turns rotten the moment the Church applies such a doctrine to its own “right” to use force to achieve its own ends, because Jesus never gave the Church the right to use force in this way. To the contrary, he made this exact distinction clear in his trial before Pontius Pilate:

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” (John 18:36)

God’s Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. Its nature is spiritual, holy, and wholly different from the nature of earthly kingdoms. These two kingdoms operate under different structures, with different values and laws, and have different goals. The civil authority’s role is to protect the borders and keep the peace. But Christianity’s role is to transcend all borders, offering God’s love to people everywhere by laying down our lives for them. While these goals may not always be directly opposed to each other, neither are they often aligned. Give a billion dollars to the Church, and another billion to the government, and chances are they will want to spend it in very different ways. But what if the Church and the government become enmeshed in one another? Then the motives of both are compromised. Deep conflicts of interest become unavoidable.

It is this conflict of interest that leads me to this fundamental assertion: *Any marriage between Christian faith and political power corrupts them both.*

I’m not saying that Christian faith should have no voice in political issues. Of course it should. But the Church’s influence must remain separate, speaking with its own unique voice, a voice clearly distinguishable from that of the political establishment, lest they both become corrupted. You cannot be an honest critic of the government when you are on its payroll, or pulling its strings. You cannot effectively speak truth to power when you have become that power.

Similarly, I’m not saying that Christians should never hold public office, or if they do, should never draw on their faith to guide how they lead. Nor am I saying that Christian citizens should not voice their beliefs in matters of public policy. What I am saying is that whether we Christians serve in public office, or speak our minds as members of the electorate, we must stay ever mindful of the

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— MICHAEL D. WARDEN

fact that the Church and the government are not at all the same entity, and one should never be confused for the other. Church and Government are two different forms of authority and power



established by God. Give the Church political authority, and you compromise the government. Give the government spiritual authority, and you compromise the Church.

HOW TO ADVANCE THE KINGDOM OF GOD

If you've never seen the movie "Hacksaw Ridge," do yourself a favor and rent it this weekend. I'll warn you, it's a graphic film. It holds nothing back in showing us the horror of war. But the true story it tells cuts to the very heart of what it means to advance the gospel through love rather than force.

Desmond Doss was 23 years old when he joined the U.S. Army in April of 1942. He wanted to serve his country in the war, but refused to kill enemy combatants or even carry a gun because of his deep convictions as a Christian (he was a Seventh-day Adventist). As a result, he became a medic and was eventually assigned to a platoon in the 77th Infantry Division. His commitment to his beliefs

initially inspired disgust and hate in his fellow soldiers, who saw his refusal to kill as cowardly and unpatriotic. But despite their intense and sometimes violent rejection of his beliefs, he persisted in serving them as a medic to the absolute best of his ability, earning him two Bronze Star Medals in 1944 for exceptional heroism and valor in combat in both Guam and the Philippines.

But his defining battle came in April 1945, on the island of Okinawa, on top of a sheer 400-foot cliff —nicknamed Hacksaw Ridge on account of its treacherous nature—where the Japanese had fortified an escarpment with a lethal network of machine gun bunkers and booby traps. Doss's battalion was charged with taking the ridge. The battle was nearly impossible to win, and after getting shredded by the Japanese forces again and again, the battalion was finally ordered to retreat. Doss, however, refused to leave his fallen comrades behind.

Carrying nothing but his faith, Doss repeatedly entered back into the active kill zone alone, singlehandedly recovering one wounded soldier after another and lowering them down to safety. With each successful rescue, he prayed aloud, "Lord, please help me get one more." By the end, he had rescued close to 100 men. His extraordinary valor and love for his men not only completely won their hearts, but won him the Medal Of Honor, the most prestigious award that can be given to a member of the U.S. military.

Here's the point: Desmond Doss didn't win over his battalion by condemning his fellow soldiers or demanding they fall in line with his Christian worldview. He did it by laying down his life for them while at the same time refusing to compromise his own beliefs.

This is how the gospel spreads. *This* is how the Kingdom advances—not by Christians imposing their views through force, but by laying down our lives for the world even as we hold true to the One we have chosen to follow.

ON NO ONE'S SIDE BUT GOD'S

Forty years in the desert forged Joshua into a hard man—a military man, with a keen awareness of danger and threat. Under Moses's guidance, Joshua helped his people not only survive the unrelenting desert sun, but also fight every enemy and overcome every obstacle that stood in their way.

At the end of those 40 years, when Joshua finally led his people across the Jordan into the Promised Land, they came to the walled city of Jericho, the very place that had so terrified his people four decades earlier that they chose to brave the desert rather than confront the city. But here they were again; only this time, Joshua would not let his people run away. Jericho was the enemy, and Joshua meant to see them utterly defeated.

But then, on the eve of battle, he had this astonishing encounter with God:

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?"

The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. (Joshua 5:13-15)

Today so much of what we hear from Christians in the public sphere are hateful accusations and condescending slurs of "us vs. them." We have married our faith to political parties, and equated them to the Church itself: "God is on our side. God is against your side."

But that's not how God's Kingdom works.

On the eve of battle outside the walls of Jericho, at the culmination of 40 years of Joshua's people wandering in the desert, and now, finally, coming to take their place in the Promised Land, God intervened to make sure Joshua understood this one important truth: *God does not take sides*. The King of the Universe is not some petty mascot or sacred talisman you can wave about like a magic charm to prove you are right to despise or malign or crush "those people" who stand against your worldview or beliefs.

Love means to love that which is unlovable; or it is no virtue at all.

— G. K. CHESTERTON

The story God is telling through the death and resurrection of Jesus is far bigger than all of that, the stakes far higher than republican or democrat, or any other earthly affiliation like race or nationality or language or geography or gender or even religion. The Kingdom of God supersedes them all, transcends them all, makes of them all petty things too small to hold the fullness of God, and too weak to be used as arbiters of his love.

God is not a democrat, or a republican. God is not an American, nor does he commit his allegiance to any other nation or people or party affiliation. God is on God's side, and on no other. The question we should be asking is not whether God is on our side, but whether we on His. Perhaps in the midst of all our yelling and accusation against "those people" for whom Christ has died, we too have become blind to the deeper Story of what is really going on here:

"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

The call of God is the call of love, and sacrifice: *Will you follow Me? Will you lay down your life for Me? Will you love the world as I have loved you?* Yes, this is war. But it is not a political war, not an ethnic war, not a gender war, not a culture war. It is a spiritual war.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:12)

In this spiritual war, God's sole strategy for saving the world is love. Not force. Not violence. Not political power. Not military might. Just true, noble love. Love that lays down its life for the world.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. (Matthew 16:24-25)

Now more than ever, the world needs champions who will love the world like Jesus did. Will you be one of them?

