

JUSTIFIED VIOLENCE; SANCTIFYING LOVE:
THOUGHTS ON WAR

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After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, my initial response was a mixture of sorrow, disbelief, and hope that we would strike decisively against the perpetrators. But as time wore on, I began to wonder if my reaction was as Christian as it should have been. What was an appropriate response to such horrific violence? My dismay was deepened also because I admire nonviolent philosophies, such as those advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Elias Chacour. While I have tried to understand and employ “the weapon of love,”¹ my desire for swift retaliation disappointed me. Obviously, I had not fully embraced the philosophy where it counted most—in my heart.

Responding to violence presents difficult choices. While there are several possible strategies for resolving such dilemmas, one method I employed was searching the scriptures; and as I did, I came across seemingly contradictory instructions. On the one hand, Christ commanded his disciples to “do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”² On the other hand, Jehovah commanded ancient Israel to “blot out” and “utterly destroy” the Amalekites, to “slay both man and woman, infant and suckling.”³ Could both commands come from the same God? The Book of Mormon also seems to countenance these two extremes. On the one hand, the scriptural record praises the people of Ammon, who laid down their weapons and allowed themselves to be slaughtered.⁴ On the other hand, it praises Captain Moroni, who raised the Standard of Truth and led his people in war against dissenters and invaders.⁵ What then are the eternal rules governing war and violence?

President Gordon B. Hinckley addressed some of these issues and contradictions in April 2003. Speaking about the conflict in Iraq, President Hinckley noted:

It is clear from [the accounts of Captain Moroni] and other writings that there are times and circumstances when nations are justified, in fact have an obligation, to fight for family, for liberty, and against tyranny, threat, and oppression.

When all is said and done, we of this Church are people of peace. We are followers of our Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was the Prince of Peace. But even He said, “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.”

This places us in the position of those who long for peace, who teach peace, who work for peace, but who also are citizens of nations and are subject to the laws of our governments. Furthermore, we are a freedom-loving people, committed to the defense of liberty wherever it is in jeopardy.⁶

All of this seems to point to a gospel paradox involving peace and violence. While the Lord commanded His disciples to “resist not evil,”⁷ there are exceptions to this rule, times when a peaceful people are “justified”—even required—to respond with violence. Is this paradox, like so many gospel paradoxes, impossible to resolve? Or are there some core principles that unite or explain the two extremes? Part of the answer may lie in the rules governing justified violence as defined in the Doctrine and Covenants. Speaking to Joseph Smith in 1833 when the Saints were experiencing physical persecution in Jackson County, the Lord outlined a Law of Retribution for communities and nations. First, the Lord commanded his Saints to “renounce war and proclaim peace,” but then He described strict constraints for exceptions:

And again, this is the law that I gave unto mine ancients, that they should not go out unto battle against any nation, kindred, tongue, or people, save I, the Lord, commanded them.

And if any nation, tongue, or people should proclaim war against them, they should first lift a standard of peace unto that people, nation, or tongue;

And if that people did not accept the offering of peace, neither the second nor the third time, they should bring these testimonies before the Lord;

Then I, the Lord, would give unto them a commandment, and justify them in going out to battle against that nation, tongue, or people.

And I, the Lord, would fight their battles, and their children’s battles, and their children’s children’s, until they had avenged themselves on all their enemies, to the third and fourth generation.

Behold, this is an ensample unto all people, saith the Lord your God, for justification before me.⁸

As used by the Lord, the words *justify* and *justification* are central to this law. The word *justify* has several meanings that are relevant, including a strictly theological one: “to declare free from the penalty of sin on the ground of Christ’s righteousness.”⁹ To be “justified” in Christ means to be absolved from guilt for sin, to be no longer accountable for wrong behavior. In this sense, while violence is inherently wrong, under the right circumstances Christians who engage in violence will not be held accountable—they are justified through Christ’s atonement. Thus, the concept of justification through Christ’s grace provides a possible solution

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to the paradox of peace and violence. But the atonement is more than justification. The Doctrine and Covenants teaches that there are two processes at work:

And we know that *justification* through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true;

And we know also, that *sanctification* through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their might, minds, and strength.¹⁰

What is the difference between justification and sanctification? As noted, to be justified through Christ's atonement is to have the stain of sin washed away, to be made white in the blood of the Lamb. But being absolved from guilt and free from penalties does not necessarily make us righteous. The *absence* of sin does not necessarily mean the *presence* of holiness, which is why the second process—sanctification—is so important. We hope to be made not only *clean* but also *holy*. The word *sanctify* literally embodies this connotation—*sanct* (*sanctus*) means “holy” and the *-fy* suffix is from *facere*, meaning “to make or do.” Thus the atonement of Christ washes the stain of sin from our garments—justification—as well as augments and accelerates the development of our divine character—sanctification.¹¹

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Consequently, violence might at times be justified; but it is difficult to imagine it could ever be sanctifying. Are there sanctifying responses to violence? The Law of Retribution for individuals and families—as opposed to nations and communities—holds intriguing implications. As with nations, individuals and families are commanded to patiently endure abuse through *three* separate offenses. If we do not bear it patiently and strike back, then the violence against us is considered “just measure”—in other words the Lord will deem our enemy's violence to be condign punishment for our violence. But if we bear the abuse patiently, not only are we promised blessings but also the three original offenses will constitute a testimony against our enemy:

And now, verily I say unto you, if that enemy shall escape my vengeance, that he be not brought into judgment before me, then ye shall see to it that ye warn him in my name, that he come no more upon you, neither upon your family, even your children's children unto the third and fourth generation.

And then, if he shall come upon you or your children, or your children's children unto the third and fourth generation, I have delivered thine enemy into thine hands;

And then if thou wilt spare him, thou shalt be rewarded for thy righteousness; and also thy children and thy children's children unto the third and fourth generation.

Nevertheless, thine enemy is in thine hands; and if thou rewardest him according to his works thou art justified; if he has sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, thine enemy is in thine hands and thou art justified.¹²

The rules of justified violence are evident here, but according to the Lord violence is not the only option—“if thou wilt spare him, thou shalt be rewarded for thy righteousness.” It is this second option of love—so often overlooked, so difficult to implement—that holds remarkable possibilities for something greater, because it not only leaves us guiltless—justified—but also can actually make us holy—sanctified.

Seen in this light, violent responses to violence might be considered the lesser, but still legitimate, law. Nevertheless, there is a higher law:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also...

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you... For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye?...

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.¹³

This is difficult counsel to follow, yet it holds the potential to not only save us, but also to exalt us. All the more powerful is its potential to sanctify *others* as well—and not just any “other,” but those who directly oppose us—our enemies.¹⁴ The people of Ammon seemed to sense this when their Lamanite brethren came against them. By refusing to resist—although they may have been justified in doing so—and instead meeting the aggressors with faith and love, they not only sanctified their own souls, they converted—made more holy—many of their attackers:

Now when the Lamanites saw that their brethren would not flee from the sword, neither would they turn aside to the right hand or to the left, but that they would lie down and perish, and praised God even in the very act of perishing under the sword—

Now when the Lamanites saw this they did forbear from slaying them; and there were many whose hearts had swollen in them for those of their brethren who had fallen under the sword, for they repented of the things which they had done.

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And it came to pass that they threw down their weapons of war, and they would not take them again, for they were stung for the murders which they had committed; and they came down even as their brethren, relying upon the mercies of those whose arms were lifted to slay them.¹⁵

We often view the people of Ammon as an anomaly in the scriptural/historical record, and unfortunately they are. But they also provide a striking example of how a higher response to violence can sanctify all it touches.¹⁶ The Savior is the ultimate example of this. When Peter smote off the ear of Malchus, the Savior responded, “Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?” Christ probably would have been justified in requesting the protection of heavenly warriors, but he was striving for something higher—something more sanctifying—and he reminded Peter of this: “But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be.”¹⁷ By allowing himself to be taken, bruised, beaten, scourged, mocked, and crucified; by responding with love to the very end—“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”¹⁸—the Son of Man made sanctification available to everyone.

How then should *I* respond in the face of violence? Certainly when the Lord’s prophet commands me to submit to a political sovereign, I am not only justified but also obligated to obey—even if it means taking up the sword. Yet it has been helpful for me to remember that violence in general, while at times justified, is not the higher law. The celestial response is love. And even though it may be impossible to follow perfectly this higher law in mortality—as did the Savior—it is a standard toward which I should constantly strive. As with many celestial laws, I must begin with my individual character, my family, and other personal relationships. As Elder Henry B. Eyring observed: “We begin to practice in the family, the smaller unit, what will spread to the Church and to the society in which we live in this world.”¹⁹ Perhaps, then, if I can achieve a degree of individual competence in living the higher law, I can then hope the weapon of love will be adopted in ever larger and larger communities. ☺

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NOTES:

- 1 See “The Weapon of Love,” *Perspective* vol. 1, no. 3 (Fall 2001), 118-125.
- 2 Matthew 5:38-48.
- 3 Deuteronomy 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15:2-3.
- 4 Alma 24.
- 5 Alma 46.
- 6 *Ensign* (May 2003), 80.

- 7 Matthew 5:39.
- 8 Doctrine and Covenants 98:16, 33-38.
- 9 Oxford English Dictionary, accessed online at <http://dictionary.oed.com> [25 October 2003].
- 10 Doctrine and Covenants 20:30-31, emphasis added.
- 11 President David A. Bednar's devotional address on the enabling power of the atonement ("In the Strength of the Lord," 8 January 2002) describes the way in which the atonement can augment our natural abilities.
- 12 Doctrine and Covenants 98:28-31.
- 13 Matthew 5:38-48.
- 14 Stan A. Peterson's devotional address at BYU-Idaho ("Contention is Not of Me," 14 October 2003) explores the transforming power of this response.
- 15 Alma 24:23-25.
- 16 See for example Ammon's response in Alma 26:31-35.
- 17 Matthew 26:51-54.
- 18 Luke 23:34.
- 19 *Ensign* (February 1998).