

Ethicist: Force an option, but not without repentance

November 7, 2013

WACO—In a broken world, Christians sometimes may need to use force—even deadly force—to protect the innocent, but they always should recognize their actions fall short of God’s ideal, a Christian ethicist told students at Baylor University’s [Truett Theological Seminary](#).

“Contrary to certain modern and contemporary Christian ethicists who say an absolute ‘no’ to all Christian use of force, I must reluctantly say, with (Reformer Martin) Luther, ‘Sin boldly’—but add, ‘Repent more boldly still,’” said [Roger Olson](#), the Foy Valentine professor of Christian theology and ethics at Truett Seminary.



Roger Olson The admonition to “sin boldly” runs contrary to American Christian perfectionism, he asserted. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and the Hebrew prophet’s vision of the new heaven and new earth in Isaiah 65 picture shalom, perfect wholeness and well-being, but Christians live in unpleasant awareness that the present imperfect world falls far short of that ideal.

Use of force a sign of world's brokenness

“The kingdom of God is not yet, and, in the meantime, this time between the times, it is our duty as citizens of that kingdom yet to come to approximate it in real and living ways. And sometimes that means using the powerful means we have,” Olson said. “When we must use force, coercion, however, we must avoid baptizing it as righteous and regard it rather as a sign of our brokenness, the world’s brokenness and the not-yet-ness of the kingdom.”

Olson delivered the T.B. Maston Foundation lecture, honoring the pioneering professor of Christian ethics who taught four decades at [Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary](#).

“What ought Christians with power—and we all have some power—do in a world inhabited by moral monsters?” Olson asked.

Machine Gun Preacher

Olson framed the question of whether Christians should use deadly force in the context of [Machine Gun Preacher](#), the 2011 movie that told the true story of Sam Childers, a Christian missionary who used violence to resist the so-called Lord’s Resistance Army in the Sudan and its enlistment of child soldiers.

“Is Christian involvement in social unrest, social struggle, the often messy rough-and-tumble of politics, even violence ever ethically justifiable? Should Christians engage in attempts to bring about justice in this broken world, even if that requires participating in its brokenness? Or ought Christians to sit on the sidelines of social conflict and beam messages of love into the fray, hoping God will use them to bring about some modicum of peace and justice?” he asked.

Olson outlined four Christian responses to those questions, highlighting

strengths and weaknesses of each approach:

- **The Social Gospel**, exemplified by early 20th century Baptist pastor-theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, teaches the value of voluntary brotherhood achieved through moral persuasion—even pressure—but not violence.

- **Christian Realism**, taught by influential theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, views the world as broken and unjust. Niebuhr urged Christians to make the best of the sinful and imperfect situation by working to bring about imperfect approximations of justice, even if that means some degree of compromise with the ungodly.

“Niebuhr’s was a social ethic for people with a tragic sense of history, for those who feel compelled to become involved in the rough-and-tumble world of politics and social unrest toward justice, for those who are willing to risk disobedience to perfection for the sake of establishing a partially just and equitable world,” Olson said.

- **Liberation Theology**, promoted by Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, teaches that Christian love requires solidarity with the poor and powerless, and justice happens when the poor are empowered.

Gutierrez offered “a social ethic for revolutionaries ... for Christians and others who are impatient with the slow pace of justice and feel called to enter into the conflicts of history on the side of the oppressed,” Olson said.

- **Christian pacifism**, taught by John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, insists Jesus did not come into the world to overthrow unjust systems but to establish an alternative social order within the broken world. Christian pacifism says, “The focus of Christian social ethics should not be on reform or revolution of the world but on being the church as God intends it to be, following the kingdom principles of shalom laid out in the Sermon on the Mount.”

Olson views Christian pacifism as a social ethic for perfectionists, but not necessarily in an altogether pejorative way.

“It’s a social ethic for Christians with high ideals and determination to be obedient to the way of Jesus, even if that requires ineffectiveness in worldly terms,” he said. “It is a social ethic for those who really believe in the brokenness of the world and trust God to heal it, if he chooses, using the church’s wholeness as a witness to his healing power.”

Olson agreed with Yoder and Hauerwas that Christians should help the church be the witness of shalom to the world, avoiding all entanglements of the church with the state.

“The church is not called to be a launching pad for revolutionaries but a community of love—the community of the beloved. The church should never take up arms for any cause. The church is the family of God, dysfunctional as it is in its own brokenness, that lives from self-sacrificial service each to the other,” he said.

Defending the weak and helpless

At the same time, Olson insisted, individual Christians “must be open to the call of God to take up power—even deadly force, if necessary—to defend the weak, the helpless and the oppressed.”

He agreed with Niebuhr and Gutierrez that Christians should “lovingly, for the sake of the poor, the powerless and the oppressed, risk sinning boldly by daring to get involved in the messy world of secular statecraft shaping public policy and even, occasionally, fighting for the lives and rights of especially the helpless.”

So, Olson concluded, he hoped he would have the courage to take up arms as the “Machine Gun Preacher” did to protect innocent children, but hoped he would recognize “even such a just cause is fraught with ambiguity and

unrighteousness and requires grace, mercy and forgiveness.”

He cited a quote by 19th century pastor-theologian Theodore Parker made popular by Martin Luther King Jr., “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Olson added, “Sometimes, we have to help it bend.”