

19 August 2015

Wrong Things for the Right Reasons

2 Kings 10:18-28

We're looking at a fairly obscure story from the Hebrew Bible today, so I feel as if I should give some background. About 800 years before Christ, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. There was a southern kingdom, named Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital, and a northern kingdom, whose capital city was Samaria, that was just called Israel. One of Israel's kings was named Ahab. Ahab and his Phoenician wife Jezebel are two of the Bible's true villains. They tried to turn the nation away from Israel's God to worship the Phoenician god Baal. They set up temples to Baal in the cities and had arrested and executed all the prophets of God that they could find. Their reign was a hard time for those who worshiped the God of Abraham and Moses.

Shortly after Ahab died, one of his generals – named Jehu – mounted a coup to overthrow Ahab's wicked dynasty. He rallied the armies to his side and marched on Samaria and the city of Jezreel, where he had all of Ahab's sons executed. As for Ahab's widow, Jezebel, Jehu had her thrown off a high tower to feed the wild dogs.

We pick up the story of Jehu in 2 Kings, chapter 10, verses 18-28:

¹⁸Then Jehu assembled all the people and said to them, 'Ahab offered Baal small service; but Jehu will offer much more. ¹⁹Now therefore summon to me all the prophets of Baal, all his worshippers, and all his priests; let none be missing, for I have a great sacrifice to offer to Baal; whoever is missing shall not live.' But Jehu was acting with cunning in order to destroy the worshippers of Baal. ²⁰Jehu decreed, 'Sanctify a solemn assembly for Baal.' So they proclaimed it. ²¹Jehu sent word throughout all Israel; all the worshippers of Baal came, so that there was no one left who did not come. They entered the temple of Baal, until the temple of Baal was filled from wall to wall. ²²He said to the keeper of the wardrobe, 'Bring out the vestments for all the worshippers of Baal.' So he brought out the vestments for them. ²³Then Jehu entered the temple of Baal with Jehonadab son of Rechab; he said to the worshippers of Baal, 'Search and see that there is no worshipper of the Lord here among you, but only worshippers of Baal.' ²⁴Then they proceeded to offer sacrifices and burnt-offerings.

Now Jehu had stationed eighty men outside, saying, 'Whoever allows any of those to escape whom I deliver into your hands shall forfeit his life.' ²⁵As soon as he had finished presenting the burnt-offering, Jehu said to the guards and to the officers, 'Come in and kill them; let no one escape.' So they put them to the sword. The guards and the officers threw them out, and then went into the citadel of the temple of Baal. ²⁶They brought out the pillar that was in the temple of Baal, and burned it. ²⁷Then they demolished the pillar of Baal, and destroyed the temple of Baal, and made it a latrine to this day. ²⁸Thus Jehu wiped out Baal from Israel.

And in this way the worship of the true God was restored to Israel. Praise . . . God?

This is awkward, isn't it? Are we supposed to be cheering King Jehu on as he slaughters all the Baal worshipers? Because there's no doubt that's what the anonymous author of 2 Kings is doing. He's all for this total religiocide that Jehu is executing. When Jehu went to the town of Jezreel – earlier in this same chapter – and told the city elders that he would destroy the city unless they delivered to him in baskets the heads of all Ahab's sons, 2 Kings thinks it's justice. When the dogs eat Jezebel, the author is cheering. When Jehu uses a dishonest proclamation to get all the Baal worshipers together in one place so he can massacre them . . . again, that's apparently justice. They deserved it. They were bad people. Kill them all.

But it may be that some of you join me in being uncomfortable with that program. You might even find it disturbing. I mean, yes, they had sinned. The Ten Commandments say “You shall have no other god before me” and “You shall make no graven images,” so the Baal worshiping Israelites had broken two of the commandments. But the Ten Commandments also say, “You shall not kill” and “You shall not bear false witness.” Is it all right to enforce some commandments by trampling all over others? If so, who gets to decide which ones are optional? Can we really promote godly goals by ungodly methods?

Well, obviously we *can*, because historically the Church has done so, often. We have tried to prevent the spread of false teaching by burning the false teachers at the stake. We have defended Christianity against the teachings of Islam by sending crusaders to Jerusalem to slaughter all the Muslims who refused to convert to our faith. In the Inquisition, we brought people to repent of their sins and heresies by means of torture, mangling their bodies to save their souls. We brought Christianity to West Africans by capturing them and bringing them as slaves to lands where they could hear the gospel – as they provided labor for our plantations, so it was, like, you know, a Win-Win. All these things have been presented as doing the work of God.

That's what it looks like when we justify using any means to achieve the Church's goals. Now, obviously, these are extreme examples, and they are also all from earlier times in history. But with that historical perspective maybe we can apply them to identify ways that using evil means for righteous ends can go wrong. First of all, sometimes the goals we set out to enforce by whatever means necessary turn out to be misguided goals. A lot of those heretics who were burned at the stake were burned for teaching things that Christians pretty much all accept now – for instance, John Tyndale was burned for translating the New Testament into English, so everyone could read it. So, in retrospect, we were doing evil for no good reason at all. Second, it doesn't work, at least not for long. The Spanish Inquisition set out to rid Christianity of Muslims and Jews. They did drive many Muslims out of Spain and many Jews into hiding, but you may have noticed that, there are still Muslims and Jews. Finally, using evil methods only makes things worse. The Crusades didn't convert the Palestinian Muslims to Christianity, but they *did* give Muslims an excellent reason to distrust and despise Christians for the next thousand years. But behind all these problems, is a more important lesson we must learn: Christ cannot be divided into means and ends. In Christ, what we do and how we do it are the same thing. We

cannot bear witness to Christ while trampling his teachings. We cannot serve the Church of Jesus Christ by means of methods that mock Christ's name.

Okay, so we don't burn heretics anymore, or use torture as an evangelistic tool. Which is good; that's a positive development. But these same principles can be applied to our own methods today. A few years ago, I was in Milwaukee, walking down Wisconsin Street, and came upon a street preacher. He was furiously telling everyone who passed by that unless they accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior they were going to hell and deserved it. I stood and watched for a while. I assume that this evangelistic method must work sometimes, or people wouldn't do it, but I couldn't for the life of me imagine who might be attracted to that message. Then, for the first time in my life, it occurred to me to wonder how many people who might have been interested in knowing more about Christianity were changing their minds as they passed this particular spokesman for Christ. The answer is: a lot. Surveys done by the George Barna Institute indicate that for every person who might come to Christ by such methods, as many as ten make the opposite decision – to have nothing to do with Christianity, ever. It appears that yelling at strangers – something Jesus never did – is not a good way to present Jesus. Who knew?

Here's another. Some six years ago I got a call in my pastoral office. It was an election year, I recall. The person on the phone asked me if I had gotten any robo-calls from candidates. Yes, I had. It's hard to avoid them, isn't it? he asked. I just hang up, I replied. He then presented me a sales pitch. For a low, low price our church could do that, too. We could send out thousands of recorded messages to our neighbors, in my own voice, presenting the gospel and inviting them to church. What did I think? Wouldn't that be great? No, I'm not making this up. I was being asked, "You know that thing that you hate? Well, you could do that same thing to other people in the name of Jesus. How about it?"

One more example of trying to do right by wrong means: trying to achieve God's purposes – or what we believe are God's purposes – by means of earthly power: that is, by allying ourselves with a political party or group. It won't work. In fact – as with Crusades and Inquisitions and screaming at people on street corners – such alliances hurt Christ more than they help. People of faith often believe that they will be able to influence politics in a positive way by aligning themselves a political party, but, inevitably, all the influence goes the other way. All the compromises are made by the people of faith. We can see how this has happened in White evangelical Christianity, which often looks like a wholly owned subsidiary of the Republican Party. But, as my conservative friends will point out, you could say the same thing of White mainline Christians, who often seem to have uncritically adopted the Democratic Party platform as if it were Christ's own plan for government. Now, do not hear me saying that Christians should not be involved in politics. We should and must. But we must stand apart from the center of power as a prophetic voice for people, rather than for party platforms. When the Church seeks to use the tools of political power, even for good goals, we invariably harm Christ's witness. Surveys of young adults who have rejected the Church show that one of the top reasons for that rejection is their sense that the Church of Jesus Christ has become just another political interest group, spinning the truth for our own purposes..

We Americans like immediate results. We eat fast food from drive-thrus and microwaveable meals. Our economy is run (and periodically destroyed) by day traders and short-sellers and equity firms looking for quick profits. We get angry when our internet is slow. One problem with that is that when immediate results are the goal, then you use any means necessary to achieve them. But hear this. God only has long-term goals for you, for the Church, and for the world. And when your goals stretch into eternity, then method means everything. Our goal is to know the love of God and communicate that love to the world, and there are no shortcuts to communicating love. In Christ, the ends do not justify the means; the means create the ends.

One final note, about that disturbing scripture we began with, Jehu's slaughter of Baal-worshippers for the glory of God in the Valley of Jezreel. How can the Bible approve of that? Well, it doesn't in the end. A generation or two after Jehu, a prophet arose in Israel named Hosea. Hosea's message to Israel was that God's relationship to the people was like the relationship of a husband to his wife – a relationship of love. It had been a rocky marriage, mind you, and the people hadn't been faithful, which angered God, but God still loved them. Among the things that angered God, according to Hosea, was the sin of Jezreel. Israel would be held accountable for Jehu's bloody tactics. God is not that God, Hosea says. Not the God of anger, but the God of love, who will never give up. Our methods, as well as our ends, must reflect *that* God.