

“So, Did Jesus Ever Use Violence?”

By Steve Ramer
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Scripture: John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Sermon

It was almost time for the Jewish Passover celebration, so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple precincts he came upon people selling oxen and sheep and doves, and bankers were doing business there too. He made a whip out of rope and drove them all out of the temple area, sheep, oxen and all; then he knocked over the bankers' tables, and set their coins flying. And to the dove merchants he said, "Get these birds out of here!

How dare you use my Father's house as a public market." (his disciples were reminded of the words of scripture: "Zeal for your house is eating me alive.")

Now I was raised in a Mennonite family,
and taught by the Mennonite Church where I was raised,
that Jesus never used any type of violence.
To follow Jesus, it went without saying,
meant that I too would never resort to any form of violence.
But by taking a whip into the Temple, it would seem,
that Jesus did, at least on one occasion, resort to violent behavior.
And even if he didn't hit anyone with his quickly constructed whip, then,
he at least seemed to be resorting to the threat of using violence.

But throughout the rest of the Gospels,
Jesus' way, his life and his teachings seemed
to have clearly repudiated the use of violence!

For instance, in Luke 9:51-56 when the disciples came to Jesus asking for permission to in effect, “napalm,” a certain inhospitable town with fire from heaven, Jesus not only refused their request, but he strongly rebuked them for their desire for violent retaliation!

In another instance, when Jesus was sending out some disciples, on their inaugural missionary journey, he specifically instructed them not to carry a staff!

Okay, so “What’s the big deal?!” you may say. But in those days a staff was not just a simple walking stick, but a “piece” of traveling gear used for personal protection.

Additionally on that same occasion, Jesus specifically instructed his followers to, “bless those who revile you and to pray for those who curse or even abuse you.” And how can we forget that on the night of Jesus’ arrest, when one of his disciples actually did discharge his weapon, by cutting off an attacker’s ear in an attempt to protect Jesus. Jesus quickly responded by harshly scolding that disciple’s use of violence which also brought all further violence to a screeching halt.

It also seems that Jesus’ earliest followers understood that they too should avoid the use of violence.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:4, included one of the earliest statements of Christianity’s understanding on the use of violence, Since I already introduced Walter Wink’s and his term “domination system to you several weeks ago, allow me to use his translation of Paul’s verse:

“The weapons we use in our fight are not the weapons of the ‘kosmos’ (Domination System) but God’s powerful weapons to destroy strongholds.”

This is a clear articulation that God’s people do actively confront that which is counter to God’s purposes but they must do this by radically different means than the world around them.

But back to today's passage.

At first glance it would appear that even Jesus, no longer being able to internalize his outrage any longer, finally cracked and let go in an explosion of violent anger.

But is this really the case?

Did this Temple court incident show that Jesus was, in the end, actually inconsistent with his own teachings? Did even Jesus fail to always practice what he preached?

John Howard Yoder, (a Mennonite theologian) in his book, "The Politics of Jesus" takes up this challenge.

He begins by stating this very confusion, "Ever since the early Christian centuries, the whip in the Temple has been considered the one act in the life of Jesus which could be appealed to as a precedent for the Christian's use of violence." (p. 50)

Yoder, however, places the blame for this, on a misreading of the text by some translators who include people in the list of "them" who got whipped.

A better translation, Yoder suggests, centers on two Greek words used as a conjunction in John's otherwise, long and unwieldily sentence.

This Greek, "conjunction junction," Yoder asserts, is normally used to initiate a series, which is the case in each of the other 86 instances when it is used in the NT.

So, Yoder argues, if we use this conjunction similarly here then it should indicate the beginning of a new series of objects. In one series we have Jesus taking some rope and using it like a whip to drive out the sheep and oxen and all of the other animals. But in a new and separate list John included only people, merchants and bankers, whose tables Jesus overturned.

Now as an old farm boy myself, I know that a stick or whip can sure come in handy when trying to herd livestock. And one need not beat an animal to get it to go where you want it to.

Sometimes a simple crack of the whip or a tap in the hind quarters or on the nose can easily get most critters to go in the right direction.

And most times all you really have to do is get a couple of them going and the rest will follow as you shout and holler at 'em.

Now Yoder does acknowledge that there are some early translations, including the Vulgate, that did lump both groups together, but he also points out that there exists many early translations that do separate people and animals into two distinct lists! In an interesting textual note, Yoder indicates that this latter understanding was also common in the early Christian community.

“The following anecdote is recounted by Cosmas Indicopleustes (ca. 530) concerning Theodore of Mopsuestia: ‘Rabbula previously showed much friendship towards the famous interpreter (Theodore) and studied his works. Yet when, having gone to Constantinople to attend the council of the Fathers (381) he was accused of striking priests, and he responded that Our Lord had also struck when he entered the temple, the Interpreter arose and reprimanded him saying, ‘Our Lord did not do that; he only spoke to the men, saying “take that away,” and turned over the tables. But he drove out the bullocks and the sheep with the blows of his whip.’” (p. 51)

I also think it is important to add, that neither Matthew nor Luke mention Jesus using “a whip” in their accounts of this same event. So... case closed! If Jesus did use a whip, (and according to two accounts he did not) he only used his whip on the animals and not people! Therefore, as far as we can tell from all Canonical Gospel accounts, Jesus was consistent in that he did not use violence and thus he did actually practice what he preached!

But before I close, let me present an even more cogent point that Yoder raises in regards to Jesus’ commitment to the nonviolent confrontation of those in power.

First, you need to truly imagine the scene being described. Imagine for a moment herds of cattle bellowing and sheep bleating as they begin to stampede through a crowded marketplace. Pigeons and doves taking flight as cages tumble and break apart.

The sound of tables as they slam to the ground, and the crack of chairs as they splinter under the hooves. Clouds of dust and animal feed join with coins as they fly through the air and tinkle as they and scatter on the cobblestone!

Screams and shouts of profanity as herders
chase helplessly after their liberated livestock,
and as merchants attempt to protect their wares.
And the moans of well-dressed bankers as they frantically try to scoop up
their money, down on all fours, in the dust and the dung!

All that and the cheers and jeers of hundreds,
maybe even thousands of customers trying to get out of the way.
Jesus' little stunt has in fact started a riot, an uncontrolled stampede
of two and four legged critters, charging down the Temple Mount!
And in that wild rush, literally the tables of Jerusalem's social order,
were also being turned upside down.

Now it was no secret in those days,
that the Temple bankers and merchants, had been ruthlessly
taking advantage of their customers for a long, long time!

And of course, those at the bottom of the social order, oh let's say...
about 99% of the populace, were getting the worst end of the stick.
I'm figgerin' then, that most of the folks in that crowd,
were probably cheering Jesus on!

No one, after all, should be required to pay in order to pray!
No institution, set up and run by mere mortals,
should be allowed to set up any kind of barriers to God!
So, "You go Jesus! You go on and keep on, keeping on!"

So why didn't he? Why didn't Jesus keep it going?
Why didn't Jesus keep up the pressure,
and use that momentum of that riot to really and radically change things
in that society that oppressed the overwhelming majority of folks?
After all, the oppressive kosmos,
the Domination System that ruled in Jerusalem,
has lost control, so why not go after it and take it down?

As Yoder puts it, "the coup d'etat is two thirds won"
so why not storm and possibly overwhelm
the Roman garrison stationed right next door to the Temple?

Yes why not?! Why not finish the deal?
You've got cattle, people and chaos unleashed and stampeding
through the streets, so why not keep them doggies rolling!
"Crack! Raw hide!"

That's a really good question. Why not?
Well... maybe that wouldn't be consistent
maybe that just ain't the way God wants things done?

In the end, the ends do not justify the means!
and violence is not the way that God's rule will be established!

Now let's be clear, Jesus was deeply concerned for those
who suffered under the heel of the "domination system" of his day.
And Jesus was also serious when he claimed that the old social,
political and religious order was beyond mere reformation
and must, in his own words, "be destroyed!"

But Jesus was also abundantly clear that that old order's destruction
should not come through the use of violence.
God's way is a new creation of peace, love and hope
and it cannot be built with the same tools of greed and oppression!
Jesus did walk the talk! He was consistent
and lived by the ethos of non violence that he taught.

But we also know, "all too painfully clear,"
that in the end it wasn't an easy choice,
but a deadly serious choice for Jesus!

"Nonviolence," as a t-shirt I once owned says, "Takes Guts!"
And history both ancient and recent is replete with examples
of those who chose to respond to evil with good
and who were often persecuted and killed for making that choice!

Each one of us here this morning has the great fortune,
to not only have these many examples but the privilege
as well to follow in their footsteps!

And we are fortunate and privileged as well
to have the life and teachings of Jesus,
that call us to and daily can empower us to live a life
that is creative, loving and life giving!

May the same passion for God's rule, and God's way
that compelled and propelled Jesus,
also come stampeding through our hearts and minds as well!

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