

In the passage from Nehemiah, the Jews, who had returned from Babylon faced a physical threat from physical enemies and responded to that threat in a physical way. They posted guards, they went armed, as they went about the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Today, we do not face a physical threat of attack and violence, although some of our brothers and sisters do. But we do face threats to our way of life, our values, our morals and sometimes to our livelihoods.

Take the bakers in America and Northern Ireland prosecuted for refusing to bake cakes for gay weddings, or worse the Romanian Christian missionary family in Norway whose children have been removed by the State because the parents were “radical Christians” “indoctrinating” their children.

Are we just supposed to accept this, after all we are in the world but not of the world? Aren't we supposed to (Roman 12:14) “Bless those who persecute us”? Vengeance is mine saith the Lord. “Turn the other cheek”.

Well, I'm not sure that we should always be as lambs to the slaughter. We are told to protect the weak and if Israel is an example for us then we are perfectly entitled to defend ourselves.

The first point I want to make is that all attacks on us have a spiritual origin. Our enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5.8). We must fight him on the spiritual plane.

And the enemy takes on many forms. We see today the attacks on Christians by radical Muslims and Islam has been trying to destroy both Christianity and Christian civilization for over a thousand years. But it isn't the only weapon the enemy has. If we could destroy Islam, there are still plenty of false religions, cults, heresies, beliefs and non-beliefs ranged against us.

But thank God that no weapon formed against us shall prosper and every tongue *which* rises against us in judgment we shall condemn. (Isa 54.17)

That is the point I wanted to raise from our New Testament readings today. And we must realise that we need to attack the enemy at the source, fight the disease not the symptoms. We are not powerless but powerful.

Jesus himself gave us power.

Luke 10.19 Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

Matt 16.19 whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed^[a] in heaven.”

Through prayer and the use of Scripture we have power to bind and loose, to tear down strongholds in our churches, our families, our communities, our nation and the world. We must not shirk from using that power.

Nor should we think of prayer as a lesser thing when we are unable to unwilling to take any other action. James 5.16 tells us “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”. And Jesus himself fought the Devil with Scripture.

But should we stop at prayer? Can we not take action in the natural realm as well? I think we can and, if called to, should.

We are obliged to obey the civil authority. Romans 13 1-7

13 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

But the duty to obey ends when obedience to the Civil authority conflicts with our duty to God. We must obey God first. As Peter told the Council "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Our forebears in the faith suffered persecution and martyrdom for refusing to worship the Roman Emperor. Worship was due only to God not to any man. Yet they did not rebel against the empire.

We also have the example of Daniel who was thrown into the lion's den rather than stop worshipping God and of his three companions who were thrown into the furnace rather than bow down to an idol.

So, we are justified in disobeying the government if it obliges us to do something God has forbidden or forbids us from doing something God requires of us.

What happens when we live in a society which does not require us to worship a false god or forbids us from worshipping the true God but nevertheless perpetrates evil. Nazi Germany is the prime example.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is purported to have said "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." I have seen reports that it is wrongly attributed to him. Whether he said those words or not he certainly lived them out. Bonhoeffer opposed Hitler. He could have remained in safety in the US but returned to Germany shortly before the outbreak of war, ministered to underground congregations of the Confessing Church, taught, helped Jews and eventually began spying for anti-Nazi elements in the German military. He was implicated in the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler and executed weeks before the end of the war.

It is true that the Confessing Church objected to the State taking a position in the official church not authorized by Scripture. So, it could be said that there were parallels with 1st century Christians opposing emperor worship; but it seems that Bonhoeffer was also taking action simply because the regime was evil.

We can admire people who do take a stand but ought we to condemn all the ordinary German Christians who did nothing? Not participating in atrocities but not doing anything to prevent them either? I don't know. Not knowing what I would do in that situation, I am reluctant to criticize others.

What about the situation where a country isn't actually evil but is moving away from the moral standard God demands? Pretty much the entire western world at the moment. Aren't we entitled as citizens to say something? Are we obliged as Christians to say something?

Ezekiel 33 7-9 says:

"So you, son of man: I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. ⁸ When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked *man*, you shall surely die!' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. ⁹ Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.

Are we in that position now? Are we watching our country go down the path of unrighteousness? Should we not sound a warning?

Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper said:

"When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling, and peace has become sin; you must, at the price of dearest peace, lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy, with all the fire of your faith."

I think he was using "battle" figuratively.

And I think he was right. Unlike our first century counterparts we enjoy the privilege of living in a democracy, we have some right of free speech, although it is arguable that right is being eroded. We certainly have a right to participate in the political process and at the very least the right to vote. Having those rights can we escape blame for bad legislation if we fail to exercise them?

How far are we entitled to go?

The civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 60s used peaceful civil disobedience. Pro-life protesters in the 1980s and 90s in the US used similar tactics. In both cases they took the consequences of their actions – arrest, prosecution, fines and imprisonment.

So, Non-violence but if you break the law you will be punished. You must decide beforehand if you are willing to pay that price.

Can we resort to violence? That may depend on the circumstances. Has anyone seen the movie Machine Gun Preacher?

Show clip.

He has a point. Can we allow such a terrible thing if we can prevent it? Even if that means physical violence? Would we not step in if we saw a child being abused in New Zealand?

Compare that though to the situation which has happened in America at least three times where anti-abortionists have killed abortionists. I think there is a difference. Even if we accept that abortion is morally wrong it is still legal. Individually, they will answer to God, as we all will. Even if they were acting unlawfully, in a civilized society it is the role of the properly constituted authorities to deal with, just as Romans 13:1-7 says. It is not our role as individuals to be judge, jury and executioner.

By contrast, civil authority had virtually broken down in South Sudan. The LRA was not acting lawfully in kidnapping children, forcing them to fight, mutilating and killing them. Sam Childers was

not hunting down kidnapers and killing them; he was rescuing children and any violence was incidental. He was prepared to use force to protect the innocent.

We are not in that position in this country. It's just an interesting topic for discussion. How far can we go? Certainly we have a right and arguably a duty to speak up. Not all of us have the calling or gifting to be politicians or advocates or protesters. Most of us aren't called to those things but we can all say "I don't like that, I don't think that is in accordance with God's will" and we can all vote.