

A Theological and Exegetical Interpretation of Matthew 11:12 with Christian Violence in Context

Dr. T.T. Bello, Dr. Henry Anjorin

*Department of Religions Studies, Faculty of Arts, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti
Faculty of Arts, Religious Studies Department, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti*

Abstract

This paper is concern with the study of Theological an exegetical interpretation of Matt.11:12 with the connection of Christian violence. In the paper the author is going to define violence and theology. The authors speak about the theological and biblical form of violence in this write up. In this publication the author revealed the primary source of the content of the canonical scriptures. Theology is not only prismatic but also of is practical.

In the paper the author will ex-ray the long time question is theology a Christian violence mostly from the sayings of Jesus Christ in the scripture (Matt. 11:12). Since violence and Christian theology is eminent in the essay, the author will examine violence, theological force and the kingdom of God. In the publication the author will explain the relationship of Christian and violence. Our situation today is this contemporary age we need to ask this question, how do we account for violence, Christian violence and forces in the kingdom of Heaven?

In a way, the author is going to expose how the kingdom of God suffers violence. Though controversial but there is a relationship between violence and Christianity.

Key words: *Theology, violence, Exegetical, reconciliation, kingdom resurrection and*

Introduction

Theology is simply defined as an understanding of our belief in God, its bearing on our contemporary life experience, the study of religious faith practice especially the study of God and God's relation to the world. It is the study of the science about God's relation to the world. It is the study of science about God¹. Theology could also be described as the field of nature of God and religious truth; rational inquiry into religious questions².

Furthermore, it could be defined as systematic and rational study of concepts of God and the nature of religious truths on the learned profession acquired by completing specialized training in religious studies, usually at a University Seminary or divinity school. Webster Dictionary define theology as the science of God or religions, the Science which treats the existence, character and the attributes of God, His laws and government, the doctrines, we are to behave and the duties we are practice³. Theology means the study of God, of religious doctrines from two Greek words: "Theo" meaning God and "logos" meaning "word" or Discourse" like other sciences, theology is a systematic and logical arrangement of certified facts. Thus in theology facts relating God and His word are presented in an orderly and logical manner. While Theology refers primarily to the knowledge of God's truth, religion denotes the practice of it. These two must constantly be integrated and united in the life of the believer and the Church John 13:17 "If ye know these things (theology), happy are ye if ye do them (practice)"⁴

Interestingly theology in a Christian context as a discipline of study that seeks to understand the God revealed in the Bible and to provide a Christian understanding of reality. It seeks to understand God's creation, particularly human beings and their condition, and ----- work in relation to humankind. Biblical, historical and philosophical theology provide insights and understandings that help lead towards a coherent whole. Theology has practical value in providing guidance for the Christian life and ministry⁶. Yet more needs to be



said to indicate what the science is does in theological study. So we propose a strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrine of the Christian faith, based primarily on the scripture, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life.

Unavoidably, theology could said to be biblical it takes as the primary source of its content the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is not to say that it draws uncritically on surface meanings of the scriptures. It utilizes the tools and methods of biblical research. It also employs the insights of other areas of truth, which it regards as Gods general revelation. Also theology is systematic and it must be contemporary, and it can be related to the issues of general culture and learning. Theology is not only pragmatic but also it is practical⁷.

Since violence is part of this essay, don't we need to know something about violence in Christian theology.

Violence in Christian Theology

Violence is an attitude and an act rooted in personal and communal fragmentation, and it traced back distorted, oppressive, abusive, unjust and uncharitable relations⁸. It is advanced by human Ideologies, personal or collective. Violence is a paradoxical beast. One of the advanced name for violence is 'coercion'. Society uses coercion to legitimize its social agencies and to sustain order. Since the inception of modernity in the world, the state has been the only one to use coercion in maintaining order since this is what modernity understands. Not minding the Harroc violence can do, people are still using it to maintaining order in their social differences⁹. It is an ambivalent force of social integration as well as disintegration. Thus the process of using violence to settle Christian challenge at time might seem the best. Christian theology does not attribute any ultimate significant to this understanding of violence and contestation may be amounted to conflict and contestation.

Violence raptures personal and communal webs of meaning. The perpetrators of violence impose upon their victims a narrative of domination that favours the perpetrator s interests and structure of reality. This could serve as the way to control violence in a society. The narrative of domination is violently imposed as the truth if the original narrative of life is successfully suppressed or at least co-opted. It is observed that violence inflict physical pain upon it..... and suffering as it destroys their system of meaning. Their resistance against the violence narrations of domination occurs when they link their suppressed narrative of life to a much larger narrative that does not ignore the effects of violence upon their lives. The use of violence and commuting of cruelties are greatly facilitated as people in conflict develop justifications for their neighbours pain. Such justifications provide them with moral insensitivity that justifies the use of brutality before anything could be called violence in Christian theology it must have been a riotous situation condition and statement.

Brethren, we must comment on what liberation of theology was saying about Christian violence. Liberation theology as the advocate of violence by the deprived and downtrodden. It is worthy of note that this position appears to conflict with some of Jesus' statements, such as his exhortations to turn the other cheeks (Matt. 5:39, Lk. 6:29) and love one's enemies (Matt. 5:44, Lk. 6:27, 35) while it is possible to make a sound case for the use of force in a good cause (e.g in a just war). The liberation theologians have not established an adequate argument for using force in the present situation.¹⁰

However, our situation today demand that we ask this question, how are we to account for violence in human experience? Arguments can be made that violence is a necessary and perhaps even a beneficial attitude of human life. The glorification of violence in the form of personal prowess (the hunter and warrior) and military conquest appears virtually everywhere in human history and mythology. This is because of the social and economic benefits of victory as well as the alleged value of such character traits as courage and bravery cultivated in violence.

It is likely that we will get the full meaning of this difficult saying by putting together the recollection of Luke and Matthew. What Jesus may well have said is "Always my kingdom will suffer violence; always savage men will try to break it up and snatch it away and destroy it; and therefore only the man in whom the violence of devotion of persecution will in the end enter into it". It may well be that this saying of Jesus was originally at one and the same time a warning of violence to come and a challenge to produce a devotion which would be even stronger than the violence. The reference may be to the Zealots and other militant rationalists,



who endeavoured to hasten the new age by force of arms. They, too, were liable to take offence at Jesus when He refused to exploit His popularity by putting their policy into practice; and indeed, in the day as in that, all who find that He will not accommodate Himself to their preconceived pattern do well to pay heed to the beatitude. This verse 12 mean that this difficult saying is probably that the opponents of Jesus are trying to prevent people from accepting the kingdom and to snatch it away from those who have received it ¹¹.

However, there are three common views about the meaning of this verse (Matt. 11:12) (1). Jesus may have been referring to a vast (2). He may have reflecting the Jewish activities expectation that God's kingdom would come through a violence overthrow of Rome (3) or he may have meant that entering God kingdom takes courage, unwavering faith, determination and endurance because of the growing opposition levelled at Jesus followers.

In any case, Jesus was pointing out that John's ministry had ushered in the kingdom of heaven. In a nutshell the kingdom of Heaven has suffered from violence. "*The kingdom of heaven suffers violence*" – This is undeniable proof that John was in the kingdom of God. He was in the kingdom of God's divine rule that has been in existence since the beginning of time (1 Chron. 29:9-11). "of heaven" or "kingdom of God" (Lk. 7:28). The authority of the kingdom originates from God and out of heaven. When speaking of the kingdom of God, or of heaven, kingdom never originates from authority on earth "Suffers violence" from the beginning of John's ministry, when the preparation for the kingdom reign of Jesus Christ began, the disciples of John and Jesus were zealous to bring into being what they misunderstood to be a physical kingdom reign of Jesus Christ on earth. They believed that the Messiah would restore civil government and military power to Israel in order to expel the Romans from their land (see Act 1:6, Jn. 6:14, Mt. 20:21, Lk. 19:11; 22:24-30). However, God never intended that Jesus' kingdom be of this world (John 18:36, 32).

The Logic of Retribution in Biblical Violence

Despite the widespread occurrence of inter-human violence throughout most of recorded history, the case may be made that human beings tend to want to avoid lethal violence toward other human beings. In human experience we usually need some overriding reason to go against the tendency to avoid lethal violence. To act violently toward, especially to kill, other human beings, is serious business, undertaken because some other value or commitment overrides the tendency not to be violent. Almost all violence emerges with some kind of rationale that justifies its use. Psychiatrist James Gilligan argues, based on his extensive work with extremely violent offenders, that even the most seemingly pointless acts of violence usually nonetheless have some justification in the mind of the perpetrator. ¹² Most accepted uses of violence (e.g. Warfare, capital punishment, corporal punishment of children) follow a fairly self-conscious logic. At the core of this "logic" usually rests a commitment to the necessity of retribution; using violence is justified as the appropriate response to wrongdoing. When the moral order is violated by wrongdoing, "justice" requires retribution (defined as repayment of wrongdoing with violent punishment, or pain with pain). We find deeply ingrained in the religious consciousness of the United States they belief that retribution is God's will. I will argue that roots of that belief owe more to extra-biblical influences and are not based on the best reading of the biblical materials. Yet we cannot deny the close link between Western Christianity as it has come to be and the strong support for retribution (that is, for justifying violence as the appropriate response to wrongdoing).

A theologically grounded "logic of retribution" underlies rationales for using violence. In "the logic of retribution," when all is said and done, God is understood most fundamentally in terms of impersonal, inflexible holiness. God's law is seen to be unchanging standard by which sin is measured, and God responds to violations of law with justifiable violence.

According to this framework, human beings are inherently sinful. Jesus' death on the cross offers a sacrifice that provides the only basis for sinful humans to escape deserved punishment. Most violence is justified as in some sense being an expression of deserved punishment ("punishment" defined as inflicting pain in response to wrongdoing). Violence in response to wrongdoing is required by the logic of retribution. The theological rationale for retributive punishment asserts that appropriate punishment reflects God's character. The first, and most basic, attribute of God is holiness – the belief that God simply cannot countenance any kind of sin. If God has direct contact with sin, God must destroy it immediately. A contemporary theologian, Millard Erickson. Echoes theologians such as Augustine, Anselm, Luther, and Calvin: "*the nature of God is perfect and complete holiness. This is the way God is by nature. He has always been absolutely holy.....Being contrary*



to God's nature, sin is repulsive to him. He is allergic to sin, so to speak. He cannot look upon it".¹³ Erickson most directly follows John Calvin in how he articulates this view. Calvin wrote in his Institutes of Christian Religion, "there is a perpetual and irreconcilable disagreement between righteousness and unrighteousness" (II.xvi.3). Hence, Christ has "to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgement" (II.xvi.10).¹⁴ Human beings have been told what we must avoid doing in order to keep from violating God's holiness. When humans sin, we do so by diverging from God's laws. Since the laws come from God, we sin against God himself. Erickson writes, "The law is something of a transcript of the nature of God. When we relate to it, whether positively or negatively,... it is God himself whom we are obeying or disobeying. Disobeying the law is serious...because disobeying it is actually an attack upon the very nature of God himself".¹⁵

In this view, when human beings violate God's holiness, God must (due to God's holiness) punish them. Violated holiness must be satisfied. According to the logic of retribution, then God (in effect) is governed by inflexible holiness and human beings invariably violate that holiness. Because of the fundamental nature of this holiness, God is not free to act with unconditional mercy and compassion toward rebellious human beings. Simply to forgive would violate God's holiness. Compassion without satisfaction is not possible for God. To quote Erickson: "For God to remove or ignore the guilt of sin without requiring a payment would in effect destroy the very moral fiber of the universe, the distinction between right and wrong."¹⁶ Justice, in this framework, works to sustain the balance of the universe. If the balance is upset, justice requires recompense to restore the balance, payment to satisfy the requirements of the balance. This payment made through punishment, pain for pain. In much Christian theology, here is where the doctrine of the atonement enters. Due to the extremity of the offenses of human beings versus God's law, the only way God can relate to human beings is if there is death on the human side to restore the balance. The only way this can happen is through the enormity of the death of God's own son, Jesus, whose own holiness is so powerful that it can balance out the unholiness of all of humanity. Jonathan Edwards wrote that the crucifixion of Jesus "was willed and ordered by God" as "the most admirable and glorious of all events" because only in this way could human beings be granted salvation.¹⁷ When we confess our helpless sinfulness, we may claim Jesus as saviour from God's righteous anger. Jesus satisfies God's retributive justice on our behalf.

Within the logic of retribution, salvation (defined as the restoration of harmony with God) is achieved as the result of violence. Such a means to salvation in consistent with the view of the basic nature of the moral universe as founded on impersonal holiness. Salvation happens only because God's holiness is satisfied through the ultimate act of violence – the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. In light of this understanding of the nature of God and of the fundamental nature of the universe, the logic of retribution indeed leads to acceptance of "justifiable violence." Violence may be the best response to wrongdoing.

Retributive Responses to Crime

Let us look more closely at one particular expression of retributive violence, the dynamics of criminal justice in the Nigeria Criminal justice is only one issue among many where the logic of retribution exerts a major influence-but it may be the most easily perceived. Punishment involves the intentional infliction of pain and is, thus, a form of violence. Punishment by the state then requires some justification as it involves the state acting violently, something normally considered morally and socially unacceptable. Because violence requires a rationale, punishment has given rise to a huge variety of justifications for delivering such pain. In our criminal justice tradition, the overriding justifications given for harsh punishments, even to the point of death, have and continue to be tied to an understanding of ultimate reality that believes that this reality requires retributive justice when fundamental natural or divine laws are violated. Such "retributive justice" is seen to restore the moral balance.¹⁸

This understanding is to a large extent rooted in a particular understanding of God as ultimate reality: retribution is needed to "satisfy" the requirement God has that violations be paid for with pain. When someone commits a wrong, it is assumed, the central question of justice is "What does she or he deserve?" The assumed answer is punishment. So, in the arena of criminal justice, the issue of authorized human beings inflicting punitive pain (including death) on other human beings has theological as well as philosophical and political significance. In saying that violence is a theological issue, I use "theology" in a broad sense to refer to beliefs about ultimate reality, foundational beliefs about the nature of the nature of the universe. I use "God" as the common human symbol for ultimate reality.¹⁹



The issue of punishment has to do with how human beings understand the world we live in, the values by which we shape our lives. Beliefs about God and God's character decisively shape our concept of retribution or punishment as justice.

Part of the theology underlying retributive justice speaks of how God was (and is) understood. There are some key aspects of the view of God generally characteristic of medieval Europe that shaped (and were also shaped by) the emerging punitive practices of criminal justice and that continue to be foundational in present-day practices of retributive justice. God's will for violent punishment provide a crucial impetus for the overriding of our tendency to need justification for killing or in other ways acting violently toward human being.

Retributive theology has infused the social, political, and cultural life of the West in very fundamental ways going back not just to the medieval period but into antiquity. Timothy Gorringer makes a strong case for the atonement theology of Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033-1109) providing a crucial link in applying this view of God practice of punitive criminal justice. However, surely the roots of such an application of these theological themes go much further back, to the infusion of Greek philosophy and Roman political thought into Christian theology, fostered especially by the extraordinarily influential writings of Augustine of Hippo.²⁰ The key impact Greek philosophy had on theology may be seen in emerging notions of God's impersonal holiness and retributive response to violations of that holiness. In the early middle Ages, this theology merged with Roman legal philosophy, which was also centred on impersonal principles. Instead of being based on custom and history, law in his perspective stood alone.²¹ Justice became a matter of applying rules, establishing guilt, and fixing penalties- without reference to finding healing for the victim or the relationship between victim and offender. Canon law and the parallel theology that developed began to identify as a collective wrong against a moral or metaphysical order. Crime was a sin, not just against a person but against God. Against God's laws, and it was the church's business to purge the world of this transgression. From this understanding of sin, it was a short step to the assumption that the social order is willed by God, that crime is also a sin against this social order. The church (and later the state) must therefore enforce that order. Increasingly, focus centred on punishment by established authorities as a way of doing justice. By the end of the 16th Century, the cornerstones of state justice were in place in Europe, and they drew deeply from the underpinnings of retributive theology. New legal codes in France, Germany, and England enlarged the public dimensions of certain offences and gave to the state a large role. Criminal codes began to specify wrongs and to emphasize punishment. From the beginning of John's ministry, when the preparation for the kingdom of Jesus Christ began, the disciples of John and Jesus were zealous to bring into being what they misunderstood to be a physical kingdom reign of Jesus Christ on earth. They believed that the Messiah would restore civil government and military power to Israel in order to expel the Romans from their land (see Act 1:6, Jh. 6:14, Mt. 20:21; Luke 19:11; 24-30). However, God never intended that Jesus' kingdom be of this world (John 18:36, 37).

Matthew 11:12-15 In verse 12 there is a very difficult saying "*The kingdom of heaven is taken by force and the violent take it by force*". Luke has this saying in another form (Luke 16:16): from that time the kingdom of heaven is preached and everyone storms his way into it. It is quite clear that at some time Jesus said something in which violence and the kingdom were connected, something which was understood certainly Luke and Matthew understood it in different ways.

Luke says that every man forced his way into the kingdom, he means, as Denney said that the "*kingdom of heaven is not for well-meaning but for the desperate*"²² that no one drifts unto the kingdom, that kingdom only opens its doors to those who are prepared to make as great an effort to get into it as men do when they force a city.

Matthew says that from the time of John until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violence take it by force. The very form of that express seems to look back over a considerable time. It indeed sounds much more like a comment of Matthew than like a saying of Jesus. It sound as if Matthew was saying: "*From the day of John, who was thrown into prison, right down to our own turns the kingdom has suffered violence and persecution at the hands of violence men*"

Violence and Christianity

It is not difficult to see why discussion of the relationship of violence and Christianity is controversial²³ When asked whether Christianity supports violence and that is a violence religion, the answer could be



sometimes yes when we look at these happens around us like Crusades, the areas of wars of the mouth, warrior popes, support for capital punishment, corporal punishment under the guise of ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’. Justifications of slavery, world-wide colonialism in the name conversion to Christianity, the systematic violence of women subjected to men and more or can we say no under the pretention that Jesus Christ as the beginning point of Christian faith, this Jesus we worship as wonderful counsellor, mighty God, Everlasting father and prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6); Even when this Jesus Christ was preaching on the mount about nonviolence and love of enemies; He faced his accuser non-violently and then died as a nonviolence man. We are not taking nonviolence into consideration is this essay but we want to know the relationship of violence and Christianity both in the old and new Testament. These essay also would like to address the relationship between violence and Christianity of examining aspects of Christian theology. Specifically, it examine violence and assumptions of violence in the classic formations of the central doctrines of christology and John the baptism. His for-runner. This analysis funds classic theology in large part guilty of accommodating and supporting violence.

Conclusion

Violence can be looked into as injustice in Christian theology in the theological reflection and in exegetical interpretation of Matthew 11:12 Christian churches today provide an expansive narrative of life that liberates people from the forceful oppressive structures of domination that perpetrators of violence have imposed upon them. This is encoded in the principle of reconciliation and forgiving spirit. These principles are grounded in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and embodied in the life of the saints. Then the applications of these principles to the public life requires the acknowledgment that reconciliation and forgiven spirit may be high jacked by the perpetrators of violence, and requires the recognition of the deep wounds of those victims of violence.

Violence is the master narrative that inspires, guides, and shapes the involvement of the churches in societies ravaged by serious violation of human rights, divided by inter-ethnic conflicts, or broken apart by even interdenominational churches. The only solace we have now is to look at Jesus as the author and finisher of our faith. We need to embrace ourselves in love.

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