

Gospel of the Absurd

Excerpt from Chapter 4 “Who would Dirk Willems Torture?”

Since the era of Constantine, political power has had a substantial effect on the way in which Christians conceive of ethics. In the 21st century, Christian opposition to torture was not only isolated, but failed to address the issue in such a way that it will not return for consideration another day. There is moral failure on both accounts, if we agree that torture occurring within the context of Christian leadership is a topic of debate. That failure is not evident in the fact that torture occurred – but that the church has become an institution that would underwrite a government's claim to such a right, or remain quiet as it occurs.

American Christians have pursued political power and, as a result, may have ceased to be relevant as a confessing body, ceased to reflect an ethic that gives meaning to Jesus' life and death, and ceased to offer an alternative to the present moral compass of a nation that aligns true north with political victory. I suggest that the church must maintain an ethic that understands the nation state may reserve the right to act outside of the boundaries of church ethics, and that in order for the church to be the church, it must nevertheless speak out against such actions and sacrifice privileges in order to be wholly non-compliant. Yet, Christians must also offer comfort, solace, and alternatives to each and every person who falls victim to the ethics of domination -- both victim and victimizer.

To begin, there must be some account of the evangelical defense of torture and a rejection of this account as being Christian in nature. Even after the policy decisions driven by the events of 9/11, it was indeed difficult to find fully committed defenses of torture in Christian periodicals. It also proved difficult to find any authors who used the biblical text to support torture. However, Gushee identifies a commonality in those evangelical Christians who either supported torture, or tacitly steered clear of the debate. As an engineer of a statement authored for the National Association of Evangelicals that condemned the United States policy related to torture of detainees, Gushee states that those organizations who refused to sign *An Evangelical Declaration against Torture* were political supporters of the Bush administration and the Republican Party in general.¹ Some of these organizations included Focus on the Family, American Family Association, Family Resource Council, and a lone dissenting organization, The Institute for Religion and Democracy.

¹Ibid.,86.

No signers of the condemnation were representatives of the Southern Baptist Conference, according to Gushee.² “At a superficial political level, the split between those who signed [the statement against torture] and those who did not can be viewed upon political-ideological lines. The evangelical political right did not sign, the evangelical political center and left did.”³ Gushee has written a book that suggests “an emerging evangelical center is competing with the right for the hearts and minds of American evangelicals. The fracture between these parts of the evangelical community is obvious and may be irreparable.”⁴ As for biblical “support” of torture, Gushee found that political friends of the administration turned to Roman 13 as the most common, if not only, pericope to buoy their claims: God has chosen political leaders to use the sword against evil, thus, they deserve the support of Christians.

However, it is too easy to blame a right wing political agenda for the church's relative silence on the issue. In fact, center to left commentators such as Gushee must accept some of the burden. He readily admits that a main objective of some evangelicals is to compete politically for adherents, thus legitimizing the negative discourse that occurs among those who claim to love their neighbors. It is saddening that both sides of the political aisle not only refuse to worship in the same congregations in most cases, but regularly compare the other side and its leadership to Hitler and the Nazi Party.⁵

Yet, Gushee writes credibly on the issue of torture and the manner in which the Bush administration, from the top down, supported the torture of detainees. But he also admits that, when he first wrote in the popular evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, though he felt it helped launch an “anti-torture” movement among evangelicals, that he had a regret.

“I regret a lack of significant christocentric argumentation. I ended the article with a reference to Jesus...but in an effort to speak to an evangelical community suspicious of 'sectarian' appeals to the model of Jesus and the radical demands of discipleship, and very much attracted to arguments based on government's mandate to use the sword to protect the innocent, I avoided grounding my argument in Jesus Christ in any thoroughgoing or explicit way.”⁶

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Gushee, *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

⁵Gushee cites Mark D. Tooley, "The Evangelical Left's Nazi Obsession," *The Front-Page Magazine*, (October 30, 2008): republished with permission on the Institute on Religion and Democracy website: www.tlieird.org/Page.aspx?ppid==818&srcid=198

⁶Gushee, "Five Reasons Why Torture Is Always Wrong," in *Christianity Today* Vol.50, No. 2, February 2006, 33-37.

Gushee continues to believe, as stated in his post-*CT* journal article, that there were “good, tactical reasons for this approach.” And, while he regrets not formally asserting a “rule of Christ” ethic in the article, he provides an important insight in his reassessment of that strategic decision. He wrote, “it is precisely our inadequate Christocentrism and Christomorphism that lie at the heart of our theological and ethical weakness as a religious community. Jesus Christ must be moved from the margins to the center of American evangelical ethics and public theology.”⁷

My belief is that Gushee made a tactical decision to avoid turning to the gospel witness as the foundation for his “arguments” against torture for two reasons that are emblematic of the crisis of Christian ethics. First, as he has already admitted, the battle over torture was not a battle over the propriety of torture of enemies as much as it was presenting a problem indicative a deeper evangelical commitment to political victory and the maintenance of political power. While Gushee and other center-to-left evangelicals may be adamant they are morally opposed to torture, they have chosen the political arena as the most appropriate venue for arguing Christian ethics, making it a political issue - and thus an issue of debate between reasonable people without bounding the discourse within a “rule of Christ.” Second, the very opening of the issue to debate legitimizes a process that continuously makes it possible to consider torture as a response to evil. As an alternative to debating the ethics of torture, those who assert that torture is immoral must necessarily refuse to benefit from an apparatus that engages in such activity. *An Evangelical Declaration against Torture*⁸ did not explicitly invite Christians to do as much.

Though the final document produced by the National Association of Evangelicals undoubtedly illustrates why Christians should not affirm torture as a legitimate means of gathering information, it fails to commend to readers any actions which might be interpreted as “cross-bearing” in response to the fact of torture. The lengthy statement organizes its argument in a manner that affirms such virtues as the sanctity of all human life, love for enemies, and even legal concerns, but nevertheless refuses to assert the necessity of embodying the gospel ethics that it cites as arguments against torture. There are no life-affirming activities that are recommended as example of loving one's enemies or acting as peace-makers. There are no suggestions as to how members of the military might respond to orders concerning torture. There

⁷Ibid.

⁸National Association of Evangelicals, *An Evangelical Declaration Against Torture: Protecting Human Rights in an Age of Terror*, (2012): <http://www.nae.net/government-relations/endorsed-documents/409-an-evangelical-declaration-against-torture-protecting-human-rights-in-an-age-of-terror>, (retrieved July 28, 2014).

are no calls for the Church to change the nature of its relationship with the government or the military outside of the call to end torture. There is no question of the legitimacy of the “war on terror,” only the question of torture. It presents an entirely negative ethic supported by affirming verbiage. Was there a consideration that, if one is to use specific biblical arguments against torture, they might be led to consider the very nature of Christian participation in all wars, if not only the war in Iraq?

The idea that “cross-bearing” or voluntary sacrifice is a sectarian ethic has much to do with the problem of Christian ethics and the fact that an “evangelical” president could consider torture a legitimate act. Just as Gushee stated that he feared his anti-torture opinion might be marginalized as a “sectarian” ethic, there is reticence about any commendation of a Christian ethic that requires an act of self-emptying of privilege. While Christians will argue fairly strongly that war is often required to defend innocent people from suffering, it is rare that Christian ethicists or pastors will suggest that forgoing privilege and political or economic power is an appropriate action that will prevent war, or change the nature of the way the church thinks and speaks about war or its enemies.