

BEING MORAL IN AN IMMORAL WORLD

Scripture Reading: Joshua 2:1-7, RSV

Recently I spent a week in Lebanon conducting the Week of Prayer at Middle East College. I never felt in danger, except once after the fact; but I was dismayed to learn this morning that part of Beirut, near the college, is under fire.

The reaction of the Lebanese people to the bombing of the American Embassy was to be expected. The section in which the college is located is largely Christian, and the people are pro-American and grateful for the help of the United States. They were dismayed that people trying to help them had to suffer as they are suffering.

A number of the staff members at the Consulate and Embassy are close friends of some of the people at Middle East College, and the faculty there were upset by the bombing. You could hear the explosion throughout the city! While you get used to hearing explosions, because the French and Italian soldiers were systematically detonating left-over bombs from earlier conflicts, this explosion was much more intense and powerful.

It is difficult to imagine the devastation in Beirut. Every building that I saw, with no exceptions, showed evidence of being shelled or hit by rockets, shrapnel or bullets. The office in which I counseled students had bullet holes in the wall from several years before. I was there to lead out in the week of prayer and had a wonderful time. Eighty percent of the students are not members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church but a number of them came out not only to the required morning meetings but also the evening meetings. I got to know some of them intimately and learned to appreciate them very much.

As you travel through the country, the thing that amazes you is the fact that life goes on in the midst of all this ruin. They told me that if there is a bombing or shelling, as soon as it's over people come out and set up their stores and life goes on as usual. People have to live and function even though there's war. When I passed through some of the villages outside Beirut where some of the worst devastation has occurred, there were signs warning people that the area was quarantined. The bodies were still under the rubble!

Lebanon was a nation that prided itself on being the Switzerland of the Middle East. It basically had no army of any significance and it focused primarily on banking and on business enterprises. It insisted that its neutrality and military weakness were, in fact, its strength. It felt that as Switzerland has been able over the centuries to be totally neutral in every conflict, it could do the same and escape the kind of carnage that war brings. It has, of course, learned otherwise. Because of its weakness, the Palestinians who had no homeland, the Syrians, and now the Israelis have all used their country to fight their own battles. Lebanon has tried to be neutral, and in being neutral, the war has taken place on its soil as opposed to the lands of the warring countries. In numbers that has meant that of the 100,000 people who have perished, 80,000 have been Lebanese civilians. They are shedding their blood in their own country for a war that other people are trying to fight and settle. That is why there is such passion in Lebanon and around the world for foreign troops to get out and let that country have its destiny and government and rebuild itself.

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You can't imagine what it's like to be in a country that virtually has no central government, although there is now one of sorts. When you travel through Lebanon, there are frequent military checkpoints, but what shocks you is that these checkpoints are manned by different military forces. In one section you have a group of Lebanese loyal to Major Haddad, then you have the Christian Phalangists, the Syrians and the Israelis. The checkpoints have tanks, submarine guns, etc. It's as if the United States were to be parceled up and a different gang ruled each section, collected its own taxes, and even had its own laws.

Naturally a lot of Seventh-day Adventist Christians have fled Lebanon because of the war. In fact there are so few native Lebanese Adventists in Lebanon that you could probably put all of them in our chapel downstairs. I have been told that in Southern California at the annual Middle Eastern banquet, there are more Lebanese SDAs at the dinner than there are in Lebanon.

Even though the church books list (and with the unrest, recordkeeping is difficult), as many as 3,000 members in the Union, I've been told that you would be lucky to find 500-700 active SDAs in all of the Middle East. Out of 195 million people, there are only a few Seventh-day Adventists! If not the most difficult place in the world for SDAs to work, it has to be close to the top.

I was very impressed at Middle East College with the number of young, newly graduated Canadian and American teachers who are functioning on a volunteer basis. The college does not have the funds to pay missionary salaries. There are a few on a regular wage, but the rest of the staff are either retired or young people who are on a small stipend. Some of the young people will be coming back this summer on furlough, and I hope I get the privilege of introducing them to you.

The thing that struck me in terms of my Christian faith was the moral problems that such a situation poses for anybody who attempts to live the Christian life. The moral dilemmas are hard for us to imagine. The first day I was there, a tall Lebanese came to me. He is a soldier in the Lebanese army and a Maronite Catholic. He talked to me about the morality of killing in war. He wanted to get clear what his responsibility was as a Christian because many of the students had been telling him that killing in war under any circumstances is immoral. He was trying to sort out what Christ wanted him to do. No matter what you say to young men in such situations, the answers, even the Christian ones, are not simple to come by. This young soldier told me that he felt the situation in Lebanon was extraordinary, that because they had not had a military force, that because the country had adopted a pacifist and neutral position, it had been ravaged. Until the foreign forces could be gotten out of Lebanon, he felt it was his Christian duty to be part of a strong military force that would keep the peace and help the country to return to normal. He said, 'I don't want to shoot anybody, but if anyone shoots at me, I'm going to shoot back. They don't belong here. This is not their country. We've been invaded.'

I listened to him and pointed out that even with all that he had said, the Scriptures could not be ignored. He accepted and recognized that, but he was not a person who could be dissuaded. His eyes filled with tears as he told me what had been happening—members of his own family had been killed. I was impressed about the fact that he even cared about the moral issues! In his situation, you would think he would only want revenge.

Because of the very strong feelings in Lebanon, the Adventists, as well as everyone else, have been told that all young men of military age will be drafted and will be expected to bear arms. Consequently,

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church leaders are negotiating in hopes of gaining some kind of concession for Seventh-day Adventists. There are few S.D.A. young men in Lebanon, but they are concerned about this situation.

I was struck by the fact that at no time is the immorality of the world more obvious than during war. At the same moment the morality of the individual becomes terribly elusive. I visited the biblical city of Tyre in which Hiram was so famous during the time of Solomon for his works of gold, etc. That city has been totally devastated. Only two weeks before I arrived did the first people return to Tyre and try to get life going again. There's a little market and people are selling produce and goods from their pushcarts and trucks.

As we were driving in Tyre, we passed a Maronite Catholic church and the sign read "Archbishop of the Holy Land and Tyre." We stopped and went in to talk to some of the priests. The archbishop has fled the country, and the priest who talked with us (through an interpreter) told us he had stayed there throughout the entire war. We asked him about the suffering and how directly had he been affected. He talked about atrocities and he mentioned one in particular. He was caring for 10 children whose parents had been killed. The local army came into the church and massacred all of the children. He conducted their funeral and buried them by himself.

I asked how he could cope with so much pain. He replied, "God gives strength."

Think about the Lebanese soldier and the priest as types of the two ways in which the Christian can respond to a situation of suffering in which evil and pain is so great. War again is an example. The soldier says I must resist the evil that is being imposed on my country even if I have to use evil to resist it. The priest says I do not resist, I do not fight, I suffer and the people who are associated with me suffer.

There is a moral dilemma here and there are no simple solutions! The dilemma is that to reduce evil, you must do evil, and that's what happened in the Scripture Reading. That's one argument: To reduce the power of evil, I must lie, I must hide the spies, I must do anything I can to get people off their track.

Historically, the only reason that social order has existed, even in the United States, is because one group has finally dominated every other group and gained control. "Politics, will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises." (Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 4)

Niebuhr also points out that "As individuals, men believe that they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic and national groups they take for themselves whatever their power can command." (Ibid., p. 9"

The question arises: in the "real" world does ethical purity have to bend somewhat to things as they are? Should the Christian water down his standards and imperatives in the light of what seems to be "possible" in the world? Can he make a difference for good if he smuggles Jews out of Nazi Germany as one S.D.A. did during World War II? Is the lower level of participation in evil justified by somehow obviating and cutting off the larger evil that is trying to destroy so many? In other words, are there

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situations in which the end justifies the means? The Lebanese soldier's argument was, "Yes, there are, and I as an individual Christian have made a decision to go that route, for my conscience's sake as well as for the sake of the people of my country."

On the other hand, it is difficult to avoid recognizing the unconditional nature of Christ's commands, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus does not say, "Deal with lust and control it as far as you possibly can." He says, "You shall not lust." The pronouncements of Christ in the Gospels seem almost to ignore the real world in many places. There are no concessions allowed. That's the ideal. We talked about how that functions even in the divorce/remarriage problem when Elder Blazen was here from Andrews. How does the ideal of permanent marriage function in a world of sin and brokenness in which people can't get along and divorce takes place? You cannot lower the standard, but at the same time you cannot ignore the reality of the world. We live in the same world as everyone else. I don't walk on streets paved by angels. If I happen to be in Beirut while a war is going on, I'm living in the world of war, death, carnage and deception, just like everyone else there.

In such situations, the question points itself at us insistently: Do we work out some kind of compromise if we want to be Christians? God's demand is still radical. The reality is still there. How does one act obediently to God in a situation in which injustice reigns? In a world of lies, is truth ever clear? When the only market with food is the black market, does one act illegally in order to survive? And in the Adventist heritage, it isn't clear either, even from the examples of our pioneers what our moral responsibilities are. Ellen White urged believers to hide fugitive slaves who sought refuge in their homes. Hiding is an act of deception. As far as I can tell, she never criticized those Adventist leaders who were participating in the Underground Railroad.

What is the Christian's responsibility? I don't think I have the answer. I'm not sure anybody has the answer. But one thing I am sure of is that the church needs urgently to look at this whole issue. The believers in totalitarian countries and the believers in war-torn countries want as much help and guidance as they can get from our best biblical students as to how they should relate. Are they to do what they can in a compromise fashion to fight the evil that is killing everyone, or are they to suffer quietly in Christ's name?

In a way the church as a corporate body can never do anything but suffer wrong rather than do wrong. But these are individual Christians who are struggling with these questions. They understand that the church's position as a corporate body is a particular kind of position, but they're not sure that their individual position can always be the same as that of the church. That becomes the point of friction and tension. Adventists do not agree as to how to relate to these problems.

I take some comfort in Matthew 10 in which Jesus warns the disciples that they will be persecuted, that they will suffer, and he tells them that in critical situations the Holy Spirit will give them guidance and make some things clear that don't appear that way when we simply speculate in relative safety. That is no guarantee of infallibility, so ultimately no matter what a person decides in such terrible, extreme situations, he is basically deciding subject to the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Many will argue with some power that not to do anything in those situations is to aid and abet the evil that is being perpetrated. To resist not at all is actually to assist evil. Simply suffering is not resistance. Suffering just aids the cause of evil; you're just one more complainer, one more person out of the way.

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At the same time the church is called to transcend all of these political and national boundaries and conflicts. The church is universal. I was also struck by that in Lebanon. One woman said to one of the young teachers, obviously there at some danger to his own life, that she didn't understand why he would bother to come to Lebanon to help. "This is not your country," she said. His answer was eloquent in its simplicity, "But this is my church."

I've never been in a war zone before. I've never seen tanks on Main Street. I've never seen soldiers toting submachine guns in public. carrying rocket launchers while they're directing traffic. I have to say that the mountains behind Beirut are heavily fortified. In my opinion, great pain is still to come in that country. The Lebanese soldiers at the college agreed with me when I said that there would be another war before the end of May. One soldier said, "They're only waiting for the spring moisture in the fields to dry enough for the tanks to move, and they'll be advancing."

A mountain of pain, a mountain of hurt, a mountain of destruction—that's the mountain behind Beirut. As you can understand, those people long for the Second Coming of Jesus in ways that many of us do not. Hotel owners realize now that all the money they invested in those hotels could disappear in five minutes of shelling and there is no insurance company to pay the claims. People have been thrown out of their homes by invading forces and they cannot go back; they may never be able to go back. Every human basis for security is gone. There is no government that can protect them. There is no army they can depend on. There are no laws to control what is happening. They long for the Second Coming.

Coming back on the plane, I remembered the words of Isaiah:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all
my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge
of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9, *passim*)

The very last words of Revelation are the words of the believers in the Middle East, and I hope they're our words today, "Even so, come Lord Jesus."