

What Are the Limits on What Christian Faith Can Fix?

The Wired Word for the Week of November 26, 2023

In the News

A recent article on the *Christianity Today* website declared "Christians Can't Fix the Israel-Hamas War."

The writer, Bonnie Kristian, the editorial director of books and ideas for that publication, was developing, from a Christian perspective, a point journalist and blogger Matthew Yglesias made as part of a much fuller discussion of the Israel-Hamas conflict* in his *Slow Boring* newsletter. He noted that for some kind of resolution to occur, both Israelis and Palestinians need to develop different preferences from the ones they actually have -- which Yglesias freely acknowledged is not going to happen.

To make his point, Yglesias proposed what he called his "joke plan" to end the crisis. That plan consists of five steps:

1. Humanitarian pause.
2. Hostages released
3. Palestinians and Israelis all develop different, more reasonable preferences from the ones they actually have
4. Two-state solution
5. Arab states normalize relations with Israel

"Obviously that's not a real solution to anything," Yglesias wrote. "But I think a lot of these other proposed solutions are just ways of talking around it."

Responding to Yglesias' point, Kristian wrote, "it gets at something that so much commentary on this subject seems to miss -- certainly in America, and probably elsewhere -- which is that Israeli political leaders (to say nothing of the murderers in Hamas) are not ignorant of what we outside observers believe is the right and prudent way forward."

Kristian concludes that Christians "in America and around the world, ... cannot fix this crisis, no matter how faithful, factual and fervent we are."

She made that statement for two reasons, she said.

First, is the current practice of "raising awareness." Kristian states that on many important issues, "the reality is most of us can do very little to effect significant change." She states that we can always pray about intransigent crises, but "if God answers our prayers, that is far more God's work than ours." Thus, we sometimes settle for "what we call 'awareness,' and often this amounts to a fun run or a social media post," which, regrettably, "is not itself a solution."

Her second reason is that while Christians rightly "have a high opinion of faithfulness and its effects ... faith is not magic, nor is it a guarantee of a happy ending on this side of eternity. It does not always succeed in protecting us or turning others away from evil."

Continuing on that point, Kristian said, Christian faithfulness "can't have effect where it doesn't exist. She noted that the combatants in this particular war are "overwhelmingly ... not Christians." She acknowledges that while there are some Messianic Jewish Christians in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and among Israeli civilians, and some Arab Christians among the civilian population of Gaza, the conflict, by and large, is still "between non-Christian combatants."

We would add that there are Arab Christians who are Israeli citizens, including some who serve in the IDF and Israel's government (Christian Arabs have been representatives in the Knesset -- Israel's parliament -- since its founding in 1948).

The depth of Kristian's belief that Christians are not themselves the primary fixers for this war was clear when she wrote "It is beyond *our* power to end this crisis, but it is not beyond God's power."

Still, she admitted she has no idea what it would look like for God to end this crisis, suggesting that God "get[ting] on with the Second Coming" might be the solution.

"I can only put my 'hope in the Lord both now and forevermore,'" Kristian said, quoting Psalm 131:3.

For his part, Yglesias, who is Jewish, concluded, "A lot of people on the internet are convinced that absent American assistance, Israel would be forced to deal more pragmatically with the Palestinians. My suspicion is it might be the reverse, and Israel would be more brutal."

But he added, "the basic logic of 'Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states have a common interest in forging a coalition against Iran but can't really do this without a resolution of the Palestinian issue' is sufficiently obvious that none of the relevant parties actually need the United States to point it out to them. What we need to do is admit that we cannot solve this problem and then try to contain the diplomatic blast radius by stepping back from the situation."

** Although Kristian does not deal with it in her response to Yglesias' article, one of his main points is that "[W]hile Israel is waging a just war in Gaza, they are in parallel waging an unjust war in the West Bank." Thus, his article is titled "Israel's Two Wars." See also #1 in the "For Further Discussion" section below.*

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Christians Can't Fix the Israel-Hamas War. Christianity Today](#)
[Israel's Two Wars. Slow Boring](#)

Applying the News Story

Kristian's article confronts the notion that embracing Christianity is the answer to everything. And it's not surprising that we sometimes seem to think it is. You may have seen the assertion posted somewhere that "Christ is the answer." We have no argument with that other than to suggest that it is sometimes heard as "Christ is the answer to everything," whereas we think the intent of the statement is "Christ is the answer to the ultimate questions of life," or "Christ is the answer to a person's broken relationship with God." But slogans usually travel better if they are kept short.

But it's likely helpful to our spiritual well-being to do some sorting when thinking about our personal problems and even the problems of the world.

Years ago, one of our TWW team members attended a church service where an altar call was given. Several people went forward to pray, and one of them was a young man. Following the altar call, there was a time in the service where people were invited to testify about their faith. This same young man was among those who spoke, and he said he had just prayed at the altar about his habit of biting his fingernails. He explained that he'd tried other solutions, including wearing tape on the ends of his fingers, but with no success. He was now asking for the help of the Lord, as well as the prayers of those in the service. Our team member says he thought the man was right to pray about the problem but he remembers thinking at the time that the nail-biting was not a problem of the man's faith in Christ -- that perhaps he ought to consult a counselor or therapist. Our member was also in a service a week later where the young man said he was still biting his nails.

While vastly different in scale and impact, the Israel-Hamas conflict, as currently framed, is also not a problem of faith in Christ. That's not to say that we Christians shouldn't pray about it and support those working as peacemakers and those providing humanitarian aid -- nor should we be surprised if a solution, should one occur, is in some obvious way, the work of the Lord.

But it is not by itself a faith-in-Christ issue.

The Big Questions

1. To what is Christ the primary answer? To what sorts of things are other sources of help more likely to be primary? In what sorts of things is Christ the ultimate answer?
2. Is there a sense in which every problem is a spiritual one? Explain your answer.
3. What teachings in Islam and Judaism might help the combatants in this conflict find a solution that allows both sides to live in peace? What teaching in either might work *against* a solution that allows both sides to live in peace?
4. What ought we be asking God for when we pray about the Israel-Hamas war?
5. What ought we be asking God for when we pray about some recalcitrant problem of a non-religious nature in our own lives?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Romans 12:18

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (For context, read [Romans 12:14-21](#).)

This verse from the apostle Paul implicitly states that living peaceably with all may sometimes be beyond the control of Christians, to whom his words are addressed.

Questions: When is the inability to live peaceably with others not a problem of one's faith in Christ? If living peaceably with all is beyond our control, what is the Christian involved responsible for?

Matthew 6:27

And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? (For context, read [Matthew 6:25-34](#).)

Kristian quoted this rhetorical question from Jesus in her article as an example of something that is beyond the ability of faith to fix. In fact, in citing this verse, she added an addendum: "Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life' -- or subtract a single hour from some distant conflict?"

Questions: What do you think was Jesus' point in asking this question? While worrying cannot add an hour to our life, what things can we do to extend our lifespan? Which, if any of those things, are matters of faith?

Hebrews 11:35-40 (The Message)

There were those who, under torture, refused to give in and go free, preferring something better: resurrection. Others braved abuse and whips, and, yes, chains and dungeons. We have stories of those who were stoned, sawed in two, murdered in cold blood; stories of vagrants wandering the earth in animal skins, homeless, friendless, powerless -- the world didn't deserve them! -- making their way as best they could on the cruel edges of the world.

Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours. (For context, read [Hebrews 11](#).)

In her article, Kristian referred to this portion of Hebrews 11 as examples of people who were faithful to God to the point of being exemplary, but who still "did not reliably triumph over adversity in any immediate sense: 'Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated' ... They 'were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection' -- and though they will gain it, they were still tortured." (Wording above, taken from The Message for clarity, varies slightly from the version Kristian quoted.)

Her point was "But faith is not magic, nor is it a guarantee of a happy ending on this side of eternity. It does not always succeed in protecting us or turning others away from evil."

Question: What do you expect the outcome of your faith to be? What sort of a "guarantee" comes with exemplary faithfulness?

2 Kings 5:10-12

Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. (For context, read [2 Kings 5:1-14](#).)

Naaman, a commander in the army of Aram (Syria), had leprosy, and came to the prophet Elisha seeking healing. But when the prophet sent him word to go wash in the Jordan River seven times to be healed, Naaman became angry. He wanted his health problem to be treated like a religious

problem: "I thought that for me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease!"

Actually, Elisha *was* treating it as a matter of faith -- for that was what would be required for Naaman to follow the instruction to wash in the Jordan -- but Naaman perceived the instruction as being told to rely on a nonreligious source of help. Naaman turned his crew around and left in a huff. Fortunately, one of Naaman's servants was more level-headed and persuaded his master to try Elisha's prescription. Naaman did. He went and dipped seven times in the Jordan, and emerged completely healed.

What interests us in Naaman's story today is his resistance to Elisha's instructions to wash in the Jordan, but being willing alternatively, to wash in the rivers of his homeland, for it is not unlike the resistance some of us may feel to some of the prescriptions for the resolution of our problems. In fact, there have been times for most of us when we've discovered help from sources outside of the church and religion.

For example, if we've been saddled with a personality quirk that interferes with our inner peace, we may have found more help for that particular problem from psychology than from religion.

Or if we've been anxious and overworked, we may have found more relaxation and refreshment from recreation, such as going boating or playing golf on a Sunday morning, than by attending church.

The fact is, there are many sources of help for the specific difficulties that plague us mortals. Medical science, for example, has made tremendous contributions to the quality of human existence, and quite frankly, it would be foolish to ignore medical help for our ailments and then expect God to miraculously heal us.

Or consider the development of human reasoning, the education of the mind. The cultivation of thinking and general learning may at times be better conducted by non-church schools and educational facilities -- although church schools and educational facilities can arguably often do as well or better.

In fact, for almost every aspect of human life, we can name an institution, a science, a method or a school of thought that has been created to respond to problems in those areas.

Many of the secular "rivers" of help are very fine; thank God we have them. And further, some of them even complement spiritual growth.

Nonetheless, despite all this help, life is more than just a healthy body, a sound mind, a strong will, stable emotions and a comfortable personality. The fact is, people can take their healthy bodies, sound minds, strong wills, stable emotions and comfortable personalities and use those resources to plan a robbery, cheat their friends or be unfaithful to their spouse.

One of the sad realities of life is that many otherwise sound and talented people suffer from a kind of spiritual leprosy. And when that is the case, medicine, psychiatry, education and the like are not, by themselves, the source of healing. We also need the resources of faith in Christ.

What is needed for spiritual wholeness is for the various aspects of the human life -- body, mind, conscience, emotions, reason, will and so forth -- to be organized around a human spirit that is

committed to God. That spirit then becomes the "manager" of the other dimensions of life and helps to keep them in the proper perspective -- focused toward God.

Questions: When do nonreligious sources of help need to take priorities in our lives? How should our faith commitments interact with those sources? When can thinking of our problems as primarily matters of faith or of faithfulness be a handicap toward resolution? When can that kind of thinking be a help toward resolution?

For Further Discussion

1. We don't know why Yglesias titled his blog *Slow Boring*, for his article [Israel's Two Wars](#) is neither slow nor boring, but it is not short either. Still we believe it is worth your time and will help with your understanding of the issues in the Israel-Hamas war.

2. Have you heard the claim, regarding the many religions in the world, that "all roads lead to God"? People have been saying stuff like this for years, often thinking themselves to be open-minded and free-thinking. And some who embrace this mantra are self-confessed skeptics who think anyone who believes in God is on the wrong track.

But whether uttered in sarcasm or sincerity, it's a claim that most Christians have at least thought about, especially when confronted by a biblical text such as Peter's in Acts that "There is salvation in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Or by Jesus in John: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Thought-journeys about Christianity and other religions sometimes take us to a couple of destinations where we probably should not try to settle down. One is the idea since not all the religions can be equally true, that therefore probably none of them is true. It's not helpful for Christians to claim an absolute corner on truth. Within the church itself, we sometimes question some of our own doctrines, and certainly the church has modified some of its beliefs over the centuries. But while absolute truth is beyond any human claim, there is this basic truthfulness in the inner experience of Christianity: If through Christ, God comes to you, then that is a true phenomenon. The fact that some other religions may also have some truth-testifying experiences does not deny the truth that is in ours. What's more, in Christianity, truth is not found in doctrine or dogma, but in a person: Jesus Christ.

The other destination where we ought not settle is the notion that since many faiths, at least when understood correctly, promote peace and good will, then perhaps it really doesn't matter which one we follow. Maybe in the end, they all lead to the same place, so the theory goes.

For centuries, faithful Christians have struggled with Peter's claim that there is salvation through no one else but Jesus. They've asked, "What about those who've never heard the gospel? What about those who are faithful participants in other religions?" And in attempts to answer those questions, various Christians have come up with no less than six different positions, all of which are speculative:

- Restrictivism: There is no hope of salvation apart from hearing the gospel and having faith in Christ before death.
- Radical pluralism: Christ is one of many ways to God.
- Universalism: Salvation is through Christ, but ultimately all will be saved.

- Universal evangelization before death: God ensures that everyone who seeks God will in fact hear the gospel.
- Eschatological evangelization: All who did not respond in this life will receive an opportunity to respond after death.
- Inclusivism: People who have never heard the gospel may obtain salvation if they respond to the light they have. (The list of six is from John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, Eerdmans, 1992.)

Where would you put yourself on this list? Why?

3. TWW team member Mary Sells points us to a prayer practice called "[Ignatian indifference](#)," which in praying means not choosing a preference, yet holding the opposing info/sides, taking no stake while we await God to grant us peace and wisdom. Mary asks, "Can we be part of God's work, and, how will we know it is God's work and not our biases informing what we do?"

Mary reports that while using a TWW lesson a couple of weeks ago, "the group at my church was wrestling with the desire to support Israel but to also support the Palestinian people ... looking for and making room for God in all aspects of the situation. No answers resulted, yet the participants expressed that they had many new ways to pray -- which was a great outcome."

4. Regarding helping the Palestinian people, TWW consultant James Gruetzner says, "Prayer is a very good start, as long as we remember that God usually works through *people* to effect His purposes. In the 1940s, the best way to support the German people was to destroy its ruling National Socialist government; up through the early 1990s, the best way to support the Russian people was to work to get rid of the ruling Soviet Socialist government. In both cases, Germans and Russians died or were otherwise harmed by such efforts.

I think that there is a parallel here: The best way to begin to support the 'Palestinian people' (meaning those descended from Arabs who were living in Mandatory Palestine in 1946 who are not currently Israeli citizens) is to destroy the ruling Hamas (and other oppressive) governments, which means working toward that end."

Responding to the News

This is a good time to thank God for all the nonreligious sources of help from which you have benefited, as well as, of course, any help you attribute fully to God.

Prayer

O Lord, while we do not know how to bring peace to the Mideast, direct our thoughts and open our ears that we will be responsive to what you might call us to do. In Jesus' name. Amen