

Sam Sharpe Lecture
'Rebellion and Righteousness -
The foundations of faith?'

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Whenever I have the privilege of talking about an iconic figure my immediate tendency is to paint their achievements on a much wider canvas. My own view is that great heroes are constrained by a reading of their work that freezes them into our own politicized construct. Consequently, a Nat Turner, Paul Bogle or Sam Sharpe, shoe-horned into a Black History month may, paradoxically, become smaller as a result.

So I want to discuss Sharpe against the wide lens of Christian religion.

Fallacies about faith

Religion in general and Christianity in particular has been blamed for many atrocities in the world. The absolute claims and intolerance of religious dogma, it is said, is responsible for war and terrorism.

But there is also a misleading idea about faith that has grown up with Christian piety. It is the notion that Christian faith is little more than a political pacifier. In the statement attached to Karl Marx, religion is the opiate of the masses. Peace with God, turning the other cheek, peace-maker status and loving your enemy all amount to a comprehensive passivism which neutralizes Christians from political passion.

Historians tell us that during the European revolutions of the 19th century Wesley's revival played a major role in averting revolution in Britain. And it used to be said that the House of Lords is the Church of England in prayer.

The truth is that to a very large extent the Church has colluded with this idea. It was a failure of the Church in the rise of Nazism.

But from a Christian perspective, history is a cyclical story of renewal, apostasy, repentance and redemption. This narrative isn't concerned with the external trappings of our cultures or traditions: wearing hats or jewelry; going to the cinema or not; smoking or drinking alcohol. And equally, the cycle of renewal has no real interest in our denominations. God is no more a Baptist than he is an Anglican, Methodist or Redeemed Christian Church of God.

In our context, apostasy is the refusal to submit to God's sovereignty and the moral order of justice mandated for human relationships. And this moral order is not limited to 'Christian nations'. The radical claim of the Christian faith is that God rules everywhere and has a moral contract on all human relationships.

Whatever else you make of the apocalyptic writings of Daniel and Revelation or the story of Esther in Persia, this is the takeaway message: God is in control.

The cornerstone of this idea is summarized in a timeless statement.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

The text is striking for a number of reasons. It has its foundations not in the New Testament but in Leviticus (Lev. 19:18; 19:34). It is then picked up in other New Testament passages (Matt 22:39; Mk 12:31,33; Luke 10:27; Roms 13:9; Gal. 5:14; Jms. 2:8).

Even more than the Ten Commandments, this teaching is described as the summary of all the laws and prophets. So this is not merely doing good deeds, or providing a moral gesture. It is the summary of God’s moral law. It is quintessentially God’s aspiration for the social order. Every human atrocity, injustice or inequality is judged by this statement.

And this is not humanism. Neither is it to be equated to Rousseau’s Social Contract, or Pain’s *Rights of Man*. It is fundamentally theological because God interposes himself in the relationship: “I am the Lord.” It is, so to speak, the equation for a timeless trinity of interpersonal consciousness: God, me, my neighbour.

Consequently it is the foundation of a New Testament ethic based not only on the idea that all people are created in the image of God, but that ultimately Jesus as the New Hu/man fulfils the law and reinforces this commandment in the Sermon on the Mount.

It means then, that the moral order of God is indispensable to our social order. So to speak, God has the patent on social order. And this social order is totally fixated with the defence of the ‘last’ and the ‘least of these.’ In James’ words:

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27)

In the combination of these ideas, the Bible gives us the clearest definition of what religion is all about: “love God, your neighbour and yourself” and take care of widows and orphans – the most vulnerable people on the planet – and don’t let the world contaminate you. These ideas provide the main beam in the edifice of our moral universe and preserves justice in the world.

As an important aside, there is no suggestion here that God is a universalist. There is no contradiction between the universal nature of God’s morality and the particularity of his holiness. As the song goes, “You are God alone, You are on your throne!” God’s crown of sovereignty is not on auction.

But within the framework of God's social order, his justice and morality is non-confessional. It doesn't belong to Christians alone. The moral law, inherent in the image of God belongs *to* everyone and is accountable *from* everyone. It has nothing to do with religious creed. The breadth of God's moral law is best summed up in the anti-clerical story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10).

In the 'Love-God-your-neighbour-and-yourself' equation, the fear of God takes away fear of 'the other'. It is a formulation, which is meant to drive our moral universe, our spirituality, domestic relations, economic and foreign policy, education, health and immigration.

Religion and Righteousness

The role of Christian religion is therefore to resist anything that militates against this divine moral order. As Paul puts it,

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Cor. 10:5)

Christian faith offers therefore, a *bespoke righteousness* that rebels against a status quo of apostasy – that is mind-sets, spiritualities and systems that work against the world as God intends it to be. Christian faith is rebellion against the *status quo* of unrighteousness – and as someone once said, the *status quo* is Latin for the mess we are in!

Our problem with 'righteousness' is that we have placed rather narrow parameters around it. But biblical righteousness is expansive. In the wisdom of the Proverbs, "Righteousness exalts a nation but sin condemns any people" (Prov. 13:34). It is a well-known text with unexplored application. But a righteousness that lifts a nation must have the force of a moral eco-system, preserving well-being and wholeness for all its citizens. The righteousness of religion should have private and public benefit.

The Bible's belief in justice is crucial for our understanding of a transformed world. "Justice" (*dikaiousune*) is the catalysing arrangement, which bridges the gap between our relationship with God and our material relationship with those around us. The New Testament Greek Lexicon defines 'justice' as: "The doctrine concerning the way in which man may attain a state approved by God."

But it also describes it as "integrity, virtue, purity of life." Here, anthropology meets theology. The biblical evidence is that there is no theological or moral distinction between the ideas of holiness, righteousness and justice. It's an educational study to go through the Scriptures and identify those passages of the Bible in which all three ideas are held together. Perhaps one of the best examples is found in Isaiah:

But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his *justice* and the *Holy* God will show himself holy by his *righteousness*. (Isa 5:16)

Holiness, righteousness and justice form a trinity of interpersonal virtues by which the holiness 'accounted' to us exclusively through faith in Jesus, expresses itself communally in Christian neighbourliness and becomes translated in our biblical response to institutional or systemic evil. In Wesley's terms, the gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.

This righteousness rebels against every value or vehicle that fails to comply with the world as God meant it to be. This is explicit in the radical behaviour of the Old Testament prophets who opposed injustice, extortion and land-grabbing. It is amplified in Jesus' behaviour in the Temple (Matt 21:12; Mk 11:15; Jn 2:15), John the Baptist who challenged Herod (Mk 6:18), and the apostles who said they would rather obey God than man (Acts 5:29).

Religion that colludes with oppression is therefore an irrelevant imposter of righteousness. Unrighteous religion fails to look out for the orphans and the widows because it has already become polluted by the world. This polluted faith fails to understand the rebellion against the godless worship condemned in Isaiah (Isa 58), Amos (Amos 5) and Micah.

He has shown you O man what is good and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly before God. (Micah 6:8)

Where faith fails to rebel it fails its foundation and is out of alignment with its Chief Cornerstone.

Religion and Re-alignment

And this has been the nature of Christian apostasy for the past 2,000 years. Church history is essentially a catalogue of rebellions seeking re-alignment to God and neighbour.

Church history is not simply a struggle for a return to pure doctrine. It has also been a struggle for revolutionary behaviour in line with God's moral order. It's worth remembering that the very first Christian controversy was not about doctrine, but about the racist treatment of Greek widows in the extended community (Acts 6:1-7). This rebellion has been a combination of internal Christian conflicts of which Luther's Nine-Five Thesis and the Reformation was a crucial example. William Tyndale who gave us our first English translation of the Bible has been described as God's Outlaw. Cromwell, the Puritans, the Pilgrim Fathers have all been imperfect contributors in the battle for a bespoke righteousness which upholds the rule of law, religious freedom and human rights.

But Christian rebellion has also risen up in civil disobedience to rage against the night of injustice and 'man's inhumanity to man'. Collectively we have rebelled against the tortures of the Middle Passage, child factory labour, chimney sweeps and South African Apartheid. So American civil rights and Black people who refused to give up their seats on the buses, Catholic bishops against Latin

American dictators and drug lords, American missionaries resisting the Shining Path in Peru have all been a part of the rebellion of our bespoke righteousness.

Most heroes have not been celebrated. The irrepressible nature of the human spirit and the power of the Spirit have joined forces in a thousand silent rebellions against the enemies of God's social order. The girl who stood up to the bully, and *The Entertainer* shops firmly shut on a Sunday have all been a part of a religious No! to the pollution of the world.

As Jürgen Moltmann puts it,

“Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.”¹

Sam Sharpe and rebellious righteousness

And this brings us to Sam Sharpe. As a literate and influential Baptist deacon, Sharpe was already known as a leader who had a close relationship to his missionary-pastor, Rev. Thomas Burchell. Devon Dick suggests that at the time of his rebellion and execution, 23 May 1832, Sharpe was between 25 or 26.² However, popular opinion is that Sharpe was born in 1800.

It is hard to know if, in his own eyes Sam Sharpe set out to do anything spectacular on 27th December 1831. But he was certainly purposeful. Sharpe's passive resistance was an early and bold example of a calculated industrial action. Conventionally, slaves were allowed 3 days holiday over Christmas. In January 1831 this was reduced to 2 days- Christmas Day and Boxing day. In 1831 Boxing Day fell on a Sunday – already recognised as an official rest day. Sharpe's contention was that slaves were owed an extra day and should be paid for working an extra day. If their request was refused, the slaves were to withdraw labour precisely at the time when the cane was ready to harvest. This was an economic calculation: payment over against wasted crop.

The plan went horribly wrong and after the initial burning of the crops at the Kensington Estate actions escalated in a full scale rebellion which lasted 10 days leaving over 500 slaves and 10 whites killed. As Sharpe resigned himself to the gallows he declared that he would rather be hung than remain a slave.

Two things catalysed Sharpe's rebellion. The first was his understanding of the Bible. But this was a reading of the Bible that flowed within the non-conformist tradition of the Baptist movement. My point here is that Sharpe's behaviour

¹ Jürgen Moltmann: *Theology of Hope*, SCM Press, London, 2002 p.7

² Devon Dick, *Lessons from Sam Sharpe, Gleaner*, 24 May 2012. Dick suggests in his book, *The Cross and Machete* that his own research disputes this.

wasn't just the courage of a Black brother in revolt! Sharpe's reaction is to be understood in the continuum of the rebellion for a bespoke righteousness. He was not an isolated Black vigilante.

His biblical paradigm was this: no one can serve two masters (Matt 6:24; Lk 16:13). It followed therefore that, theologically, slavery as an industrial and economic construct was bankrupt and he wanted to change it by passive resistance.

Secondly, Sharpe based his actions on political analysis. His ability to read meant that he was acutely aware of the abolitionist movement, fuelled in part by Baptist sentiments. But he was also aware of the extensive Parliamentary debates taking place in the House of Commons. The general consensus is that Sharpe mistakenly thought that abolition was either imminent or had already taken place and that his industrial action would in some way be vindicated by Parliamentary actions.

As we now know, slavery was abolished in 1834. But Sharpe's protest took place in the political aftermath of the Abolition of the Slave Trade 1807 and the founding of the Anti Slavery Society in 1823. The ferment of abolitionism was a part of Sharpe's political environment. As Dr Muir reminds us, after 1808 the influx of Black slaves to the Caribbean and America was negligent and,

“The world in which Sam Sharpe conducted his rebellion was a world in moral and economic transition. It was a world of revolutionary possibilities.”³

To return to his political context, Sharpe stood in the revolutionary slipstream of the incredible revolution in 1800 in Haiti where the ex-slave Toussaint L'Ouverture resisted Napoleon and established the first nation of former slaves. He would have been very aware of the new Negro colony of Free Town in Sierra Leone established between 1787-1792.

In the USA at least three rebellions would have been common knowledge: on 7 October 1800 General Gabriel 'the Black Samson' was executed for insurrection; in 1822 the Methodist Denmark Vesey's ambitious plot in North Carolina was stymied; and on 11 November 1831 - just a few days before Sharpe's rebellion - Nat Turner was hanged for his plot against Virginia slave owners.

What may have influenced Sharpe's non-violence, was that in each case the US rebellions, though directly influenced by their reading of the Bible, were all

³ Dr. R. David Muir, *Slavery, Abolition and Diasporan Memory & the Curious Invisibility of Sam Sharpe from Baptist Centenary Historiography* (A Discussion Paper) Regent's Park College, Oxford, October 2014

committed to the wholesale slaughter of plantation owners. As Wilmore reminds,

“Nat Turner, like others whose names are buried under the debris of the citadel of American slavery, discovered that the God of the Bible demanded justice, and to know him and his Son Jesus Christ was to be set free from every power that dehumanizes and oppresses.”⁴

But even more significantly, the literate Sharpe would have been aware that the rebellious *zeitgeist* of the period in which he was born was not confined to Black rebellion. The battlefields of Europe were testaments to the thirst for freedom. Waterloo in 1815, and throughout 1830 battles for independence raged in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Poland, Italy and Belgium.

If Sharpe did misread the political signals in the British Parliament he could have been forgiven for doing so. For it's likely that his political calculations were influenced by the enormous groundswell for abolition sustained over a thirty-year period. On 15 May 1830 an abolitionist meeting at the Exeter Hall presented an unprecedented 172,000 signatures for abolition to the UK Parliament.⁵

Sharpe's rebellion was a crucial chapter in the cyclical rebellion for authentic faith and the moral order and his behaviour cannot be fully appreciated apart from the environment of rebellion in which his own political surveillance took place.

And of even more significance, Sam Sharpe's actions may well have drawn inspiration from the missionary movement that galvanized abolition during his lifetime. Quakers, now established champions of abolition, expelled all slave owners in 1774 and released all their slaves in 1776. It is inconceivable that Sharpe would not have heard of the Guyana Demerara emancipation movement of the Baptist missionary, John Smith, between 1817-1824.

In 1809 the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was proposing to send Black people from the West Indies and the US as missionaries to Africa.⁶ In 1830 the Black Baptist, Richard Pinnock was baptized with his eldest daughter and took the Lord's Supper from the Baptist missionary, John Clarke.⁷ And when in 1830 a Black Baptist, Sam Swiney, was found guilty of preaching without his master's consent, yet another abolitionist Baptist missionary, William Knibb, took up his case.⁸

⁴ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism, An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, Orbis, Meryknoll, New York 1986, p. 64

⁵ Stiv Jakobsson, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother British Missions and the Abolition of the Slave Trade & Slavery in the West Africa & the West Indies 1786-1838*, Uppsala, Switzerland 1972, p.448

⁶ Extract Butschar to Nyländer 16 Sept 1809 from Klein to Pratt 21 July in Proceedings of CMS 1812

⁷ Baptist Mag. April 1850 p.197-204

⁸ *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, Vol. IV No.77, 1 March 1831

Devon Dick's *Rebellion to Riot* outlining the Jamaican church's contribution to nation-building during and after slavery identified Baptist ambivalence to Sharpe's rebellion.⁹ But even so, the powerful lobby of missionaries was a compatible theological sound-check for his radical voice. At a London meeting in 1832 William Knibb estimated that there were over 20,000 Baptists in Jamaica.¹⁰

And this was significant because the engine for abolition was moving away from a few established voices of the Wilberforce kind, to the impatient non-conformist movements. In 1823 Parliament received 6 Anglican petitions and 1 non-conformist petition. In 1826, 5 Anglican petitions against 6 non-conformists. In 1830 there were 3 Anglican petitions compared to 70 non-conformists.¹¹ This meant that the more coercive role of conversion envisaged by the established plantation owners¹² was being replaced by the abolitionist theology of the non-conformists. As David Brian Davis claims, "The main thrust of eighteenth century revivalism ended with the missionary not the abolitionist."¹³

If we are to benefit from Sharpe's participation in bespoke righteousness, we should learn the power of this two-fold perspective that motivated him to act with such imagination and courage.

A Biblicism which ignores political realities is likely to neutralize God's rebellion against unrighteousness. It makes us the pious pawns of our political leaders who are happy to attend our conventions and public gatherings to be applauded and prayed for without being held accountable for political righteousness.

So many of our churches attract public figures as a matter of course – something we should be commended for. But there is now scope for a rebellious reading of Scriptures which make us more prophetic in the counter.

In this reading, we must go beyond narrating the anti-clerical story of the Good Samaritan in terms of good social work, for as Martin Luther King suggests,

"We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside but that will be only an initial act... True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."¹⁴

⁹ Devon Dick, *Rebellion to Riot, The Jamaican Church In Nation Building*, Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, 2002 p.68

¹⁰ Stiv Jakobsson, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother British Missions and the Abolition of the Slave Trade & Slavery in the West Africa & the West Indies 1786-1838*, Uppsala, Switzerland 1972, p.480

¹¹ Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Anti-Slavery*, MacMillan Press, 1982,

¹² See J Henry Bennett Jr, *Bondsmen and Bishops Slavery and Apprenticeship on Codrington Plantations in Barbados, 1710-1838*, University California Press, Los Angeles, 1958

¹³ David Brian Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, Cornell University Press, USA 1970, p.388

¹⁴ Martin Luther King Jr speech, 'Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence', 4 April 1967

Good leadership, says Archbishop Rowan Williams, is the church “obstinately asking the State about its accountability and the justification of its priorities”¹⁵ and helping people to ask the right questions.¹⁶

When we fail to do so, we are in danger of worshipping whilst being passive co-conspirators with unrighteousness.

But biblical rebellion also works with the grain of political and economic realities. Like Moses in Egypt and Esther in Persia, rebellion works with political intelligence in order to prevent oppression degenerating to total oblivion.

And yet our reading of political realities is never done in isolation of our biblical framework. To leave the bible behind is to make us political activists alone. This was the substantial difference between King and the Black Power Movement. Our calling is wider and far more enduring.

Our righteous rebellion as a foundation of Christian faith will always and inevitably bring us into collaboration with non-Christian co-workers for rightness. But our calling is to bring our church to re-alignment with the mission of God. Our mission in the world is to call society to stand behind the yellow line where it is safer for everyone. Ultimately it is to love God, your neighbour and yourself.

I believe that this is the legacy of Sam Sharpe the Baptist deacon and rebel for righteousness.

Rev Joel Edwards

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, *Archbishop's Liverpool Lecture*, 26 January 2008 European Faith & Culture,

¹⁶ Christian Aid AGM, 15 October 2013