

GOD'S OTHER SERVANTS

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GOD'S OTHER SERVANTS

Whereas the previous article had the context of direct ministerial interaction with American Christians serving in active military duty, my own context is that of residence in the country of Ukraine which has been under invasion by the Russian Federation for more than eight months. Having had the privilege of planting churches in both countries in the 1990s, my family and I have close and ongoing relationships with Christians in both nations and are deeply grieved by this current failure of diplomacy and the ensuing war. Now with very real questions about military service from two different sides of a terrible conflict, I would like to suggest some additional biblical texts that I believe to be helpful in this discussion.

Historically, Christians have become accustomed to thinking of the church as God's only instrument for addressing the problems of society and the world, but this premise is not entirely true. Although the Christian ministry of reconciliation is by far the most important divine mandate and the only one with promised eternal benefits, God also works through the secular governing authorities to fulfil other mandates within human society. Considering the Christian message and commitment to love and do good to others (including one's enemies), some of the practical applications of these other mandates are not compatible with Christian obligations as taught and exemplified by Jesus and his apostles. This reality of different mandates is probably best demonstrated in Paul's teaching in Rom 12:17-13:7 where the division of the chapters may cause us to miss the connection between the prohibition of a Christian to not take revenge and the obligation of earthly authorities to punish the wrongdoer.

In resonance with Christ's teaching to love our enemies (Matt 5:44-48 and Luke 6:27-35), Paul gave instructions to the saints in Rome in Rom 12:17-21 that Christians are not to repay evil for evil nor take revenge, but instead, it is God who will repay, and, in his wrath, avenge. In Greek, these words translated "to take revenge" and "avenge" are derived from the same root word which literally means action coming "out from justice."¹ In other words, the punishment of wrongdoers within human society does not fall within the remit of Christian activity but instead belongs to God and will be carried out according to his timing and means.

God's Servants for Justice and Punishment

In the following section of Rom 13:1-7, Paul moved from the other worldly ethic of God's kingdom that in love answers evil with good, to the temporal responsibility of governing authorities to administer justice and answer evil with punishment. This is, of course, a very narrow view of governmental obligation and function when we consider the Old Testament's detailed description of what God expected in righteous leadership and administration.² Thus, without making any comment or evaluation regarding how well the governing authorities fulfilled their obligations and functions, Paul unconditionally affirmed their authority as being from God and that Christians were required to submit, support, and respect them. In fact, Paul commanded Christians to "do what is right" expecting commendation, while at the same time "to fear" if they do what is wrong since punishment should rightfully follow. Christians are in no way above the law and there may even be circumstances under which the statutes of secular government inform (or simply remind) a Christian's conscience as to what is right or wrong—something both helpful and good.

In Rom 13:1-7, Paul strongly affirmed the role and function of the governing authorities with the use of some very specific and meaningful terms. Firstly, he described the governing authorities as "God's servant" (Gr., *diákonos theóu*) which are the very same Greek words that Paul had written a year earlier in describing

¹ The root form is "1558 - **ékdikos**; exacting penalty from, avenging" and constructed from "1537 - **ek**; a prim. prep. denoting origin; from, from out of" and "1349 - **dikē**; a primary word; right (as self-evident), justice (the principle, a decision or its execution)." And then from **ékdikos** is derived "1556 - **ekdikeō** - to vindicate, to avenge," and then from **ekdikeō** is derived "1557 - **ekdikēsis**; vengeance, vindication." Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition* (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998).

² Deut 16:18-20; 25:15; 2 Chr 9:8; Ps 72:1-4; etc.

Timothy and himself as “servants of God” in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 6:4). Secondly, the specific function of government that Paul was highlighting connected directly to the prohibition put on Christians just a few verses earlier by his word usage. Whereas Christians are not to repay evil with evil or “take revenge,” the governing authority as “God’s servant” was to act as “an agent of wrath to bring punishment” on the evildoer. This Greek word translated “an agent to bring punishment” is the root form mentioned earlier from which the words “to take revenge” and “avenge” were derived. As if these related words were not enough to make the connection, the earlier command to “leave room for God’s wrath” has now been actualized as the governing authorities in their action as God’s agent “of wrath” against evildoers. Christians, God’s servants of reconciliation, are commanded to answer evil with good, but the governing authorities are empowered to answer evil with punishment; since “he does not bear the sword for nothing,” which implied that the full extent of legal justice could even include capital punishment. Paul then finished this discussion of how to answer evil with this explanation to the Roman Christians that “this is why you pay taxes” and therefore “give everyone what you owe him.” Thus, we see one of the ways in which God might avenge when Christians are prohibited from doing so: God has established the governing authorities as his agent to bring punishment and thereby charges the Christians to financially support, respect and honor “his other servant.”

Christian Service and the Governing Authorities

The fact that these two divinely established ministries of reconciliation and punishing the evildoer are so diametrically opposed in how they respond to evil in the world may explain the New Testament’s silence and lack of specific directives to believers who serve in secular government. The New Testament identifies five societal structures wherein Christians might possibly play different roles in interaction with each other but only four of them are accompanied by instructions to both sides of the relationship (i.e., husband/wife, parent/child, master/slave, and church leader/church member). In the area of citizen and governing authorities, only citizens are addressed and commanded “to submit” (Rom 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13) with no corresponding directives being given to disciples in secular authority as to how to perform their roles and duties. As the customary practice of Christianity moved towards its 4th century Constantinian form where government and church increasingly became partners in exercising power in society, the non-biblical proposition that an individual Christian had both a public and private life was proposed to reconcile the possible conflict between the opposing divine mandates. But if we understand that the command to “not avenge” in Rom 12:19 inherently included the “refusal to act as an agent to bring punishment” just six verses later, then the lack of directives to disciples who might be serving as part of the governing authorities makes sense. This is not to say that Christians could not perform duties in other areas of governmental service like benevolence, education, administration, tax collection, etc., that may possibly resonate with Christian obligations without contradiction, but a “carte blanche” approval to all possible forms of governmental service is not possible when some of those activities involve responding to evil with the sword and lethal force. Christians need to be aware that certain commitments (i.e., pledges of obedience) to secular authorities like those of the military, law enforcement and even the judiciary can potentially violate the foundational call of discipleship to Jesus of answering evil with good in an attitude of love.

When we compare Paul’s idealistic description of the governing authorities and their mandate for rewarding and punishing in Rom 13:1-7 with his own personal experiences of submitting to such authorities, we begin to see how the idealism of the mandate and its realization sometimes failed to match up. In 2 Cor 5:17-6:2 Paul gave one of his most detailed descriptions of the ministry of reconciliation and then went on to testify about the suffering and sacrifices that he and Timothy endured as “servants of God” because of that ministry: “we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; ... in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left ...” (2 Cor 6:3-7). A few chapters later Paul added even further details to his hardships: “I have ... been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned ...” (2 Cor 11:23-25). In Paul’s case, such experiences were to be accepted as typical and even characteristic of fulfilling his ministry since it had been stated from the beginning that as the Lord’s chosen instrument “he must suffer” for the Lord’s name (Acts 9:16). Although he sometimes suffered without “due legal process” at the hands of mobs

incited by Jewish leaders jealous for their religious traditions or disgruntled Roman citizens defending their social customs or commercial interests, Paul also testified to beatings and imprisonments that could have only been administered by, or with the approval of, the “governing authorities” whose existence and function he categorically defended and justified in Rom 13:1-7.

Ironically, at one time Paul had understood himself to be God’s agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Although he had acted in good conscience (Acts 23:1) in the name of the Jewish authorities, he would later describe himself as having been “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man” who “act[ed] in ignorance and unbelief” (1 Tim 1:13). Therefore, despite Paul’s unqualified defense of the divine establishment of the “governing authorities,” Paul himself served as an example of just how wrong and misguided those same “governing authorities” could be in the carrying out of their divine mandates and duties. To some extent, this possibility of moral failure should not surprise us since in all the other societal structures mentioned earlier, there was also the possibility of a lack of empathy and understanding, as well as the temptation to abuse authority and not fulfill obligations or duties towards one another.

Christian Testimony before the Governing Authorities

In Matt 5:14, Jesus commissioned all Christians to be “the light of the world,” which under certain circumstances went beyond addressing society in general to even include testifying before the governing authorities. When Jesus stood before the judgment seat of Pontius Pilate in John 18-19, he not only declared the other-worldly nature of his kingdom and his mission of truth-speaking, but he also called out Pilate’s failure to administer justice when he said: “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (John 19:11). Although Jesus affirmed the legitimacy of Pilate’s power, he also demonstrated through his own words and actions the recognition of an even higher authority and exemplified what it meant to testify to the truth. Although disciples of Jesus are sent out into the world with a message of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, for a person to accept this message, they must first acknowledge their own wrongdoing and need of salvation. Therefore, Jesus told his disciples, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18) and explained that “it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil” (John 7:7).

Knowing that a possible outcome of testifying about him is hatred and rejection by the world, Jesus did not leave Christians powerless. On the contrary, he promised his disciples that the coming Holy Spirit would testify through them: “When the Counselor comes, ... the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify ... he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 15:26-27; 16:8). Matthew’s gospel also affirmed that this testimony by the Spirit would take place when the disciples would be handed over to local councils and brought before governors and kings (Matt 10:17-20). Christians were never mandated to approach the governing authorities in order to transform society by means of political power or structures, but instead it would be from the context of their mission to love, serve, and speak the truth that they would “handed over” and “brought before” the governing authorities in order to testify. This prophetic statement was fulfilled almost immediately and not long after the establishment of the church. Peter and John and then all the apostles were arrested. When told to not speak or teach in the name of Jesus, they said, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-19) and “we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Then, after being flogged and again being commanded to not speak in the name of Jesus, the apostles never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ. In the same way that a Christian cannot submit to any other human being whose will stands contrary to that of Christ (cf., Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26), so he or she cannot submit to governing authorities that demand behavior in opposition to Christ’s teachings.

In Acts 9:15, Jesus chose Paul for the apostolic ministry and said, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.” Despite this divine commissioning, Paul missed his first opportunity to testify since when he learned that the governor in Damascus wanted to arrest him, he fled and escaped over the wall in a basket (2 Cor 11:29-33; cf., Acts 9:19b-24). After this initial failure, Paul’s letters and the Acts narrative affirm that he never again ran away but instead, stood and testified. For example, after his final visit to Jerusalem where he was arrested for

disturbing the peace and taken to Caesarea, he stood before the Roman governor, Felix, together with his Jewish accusers. Although Felix made no immediate judgment, he later “sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus” and “as Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, ‘That’s enough for now!’” (Acts 24:24-25). Paul’s testimony was not limited to simply the presentation of the gospel, but as a “truth-speaker” for God he also boldly addressed the moral aspects of earthly governance, and the governor grew afraid. And yet, despite how courageous and confident these stories may sound, near the end of his ministry Paul continued to request the prayers of the saints for boldness and the right words as “an ambassador in chains” (Eph 6:19-20). Therefore, in imitation of Jesus, the apostles demonstrated yet another obligation of Christians to the governing authorities—not only were they to submit, financially support, and respect them, but when brought before “God’s other servants,” the ministers of reconciliation were to testify to the truth about Jesus, his righteousness, and his kingdom.

Waging Spiritual Warfare through Truth-Speaking

The truth-speaking to which Jesus calls us to will challenge the unrighteousness in the world and in some circumstances provoke a violent response: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt 10:34; cf., Luke 12:51 where “sword” is replaced by “division”). Since “citizenship in heaven” (Phil 3:10) supersedes all other ethnic or nationalistic commitments, devotion to Jesus and his kingdom can be very difficult for secular authorities to understand and accept. In Christ, the usual divisions of culture, language, economics, race, and gender, which are typically used as value systems or for the justification of dominance, are all subjected to a higher mandate of brotherly love and unity (Col 3:11-14). In Christ, the Gentiles were invited to become “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (Eph 2:19) and were thereby formed together into a “spiritual” Israel, open to all nations— “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9). The kingdom that Jesus had testified about before Pilate was now becoming reality.

The kingdom of God exists beyond physical boundaries and is not based in earthly political power. The church is called to maintain justice and order within itself through the imitation of Christ and effective church discipline (cf., 2 Cor 10:6), and together engage in the true battle between good and evil for the souls of humanity. This spiritual battle takes place on two related fronts: first in the hearts of individuals, and then in the collective confrontation of the church with the world. Therefore, Paul admonished the church in Ephesus:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph 6:10-12)

Although Christians are to do no harm to their neighbour (Rom 13:10), they are involved in a spiritual war that in the end has two extreme and opposite outcomes: eternal fellowship with God or eternal separation from God.

This battle also requires armament and weaponry, and through his Spirit God outfits every Christian with what is necessary (Eph 6:13-17). Paul also alluded to this battle aspect in his description of doing the ministry of reconciliation: “... in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love, in truthful speech and in the power of God, with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left” (2 Cor 6:6b-7). Later in that same letter, Paul further explained this kind of action:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 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 10:3-5)

Although Christians are in this battle together, each person must “fight the good fight, holding on to faith and good conscience” (1 Tim 1:18-19) and each Christian must make their own decision to remain faithful to the end.

Echoing Jesus' mandate of bringing a sword and division, Paul described the effect of Christian ministry as being "the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing ... to the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life" (2 Cor 2:15-16). The Hebrew writer also explained that the word of God is like a sword that penetrates and divides, because: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:13). Like the soils of the parable that show their true nature through their response to the seed that is sown, so the hearts of the world are exposed by the truth of Christian testimony.

Unjust Suffering as a Christian

In his first letter, Peter repeated Paul's teaching to the Roman church and affirmed the continuity between Rom 12:17-21 and Rom 13:1-7. Christians are to:

- (1) Submit to the authorities, acknowledging their divine commission to punish or commend (1 Peter 2:13-14; cf., Rom 13:1-4).
- (2) Love as brothers and to not repay evil with evil (1 Peter 3:8-9; cf., Rom 12:17-18).
- (3) Entrust themselves to the Lord, who is mindful of the righteous and is against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:12; cf., Rom 12:19).

Beyond this, Peter's teaching also spoke directly to Paul's life experience and the possibility of a Christian being judged unjustly, despite doing good—and thereby be subjected to unjust suffering. In fact, Peter told the Christians that "to this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

In his life, Jesus modeled these apostolic directives through peaceful submission, refusal to retaliate, and entrusting himself to God, who judges justly. Consequently, Peter repeatedly stated that, for a Christian, to suffer unjustly is commendable before God (1 Peter 2:19, 20; 3:17) and "if you suffer for what is right, you are blessed" (1 Peter 3:13; cf. 4:1-2, 12-14). Even more specifically, "if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:16). Within the context of unjust suffering is the possibility of testifying to the truth; therefore Peter encouraged Christians to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have ... so those who speak maliciously ... may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:15-16). The world may "heap abuse" on Christians for refusing to indulge sinful passions, "but they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (1 Peter 4:4-5).

One of the great paradoxes that manifested itself in the gospel story of Jesus' betrayal, abandonment, trials, and condemnation to death, was the inversion of judgment that took place on the spiritual plane. As all the other actors in the story exercised their freewill to decide and to act, as well as in some cases even to use their earthly authority to judge, every decision that was made served as a self-indictment of weakness, compromise, and sin: i.e., the disciples were fearful; Judas was treacherous; the Jews were jealous; the high priest was vindictive; Herod was unspiritual; Pilate was self-protective; and the Roman soldiers complicit. Thus, Jesus demonstrated an important function of Christians testifying before the governing authorities — a means for God to expose the hearts and motives of those to whom earthly power and authority have been entrusted. In this way, Peter observed that "it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17). Judgment begins with the family of God, and hopefully by means of that judgment, the testimony about Christ may be heard within society. As already noted, Christians were never commanded to seek out this confrontation. From the beginning they conducted some of their more controversial activities privately in their homes (Act 2:46b) and on occasion even chose to physically leave the jurisdiction of certain governing authorities (Acts 8:1b). But when confrontation is unavoidable, Christians should be prepared to testify to the truth about Jesus and his kingdom, trust that the Holy Spirit will give them the words and accept the possibility of unjust suffering.

Paul assured Timothy that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 2:12). The testimony of the Hebrew writer confirmed it when he reminded his readers of how they had stood their ground in the face of suffering, were publicly insulted, persecuted and imprisoned, or sympathized with and those so treated (Heb 10:32-34). In all truth, there may be no greater test for a

Christian's commitment than to suffer unjustly, and no greater opportunity to truly demonstrate the heart of Christ as well. Therefore, let us accept the Hebrew writer's word of admonition and encouragement:

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while,

“He who is coming will come and will not delay.

But my righteous one will live by faith.

And if he shrinks back,

I will not be pleased with him.”

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. (Hebrews 10:36-39)

Still today, if the governing authorities make demands of obedience contrary to the teachings of Christ, Christians are obligated to testify to the truth, refuse to obey, and then accept whatever consequences might follow, whether ostracization, punishment, imprisonment, or death. In the early centuries of the church, the cost of witnessing became so well established, that the Greek word *mártys* meaning “witness” began to carry the added connotation of “witnessing to the point of death,” eventually becoming the English word “martyr.” As is the case with the rest of humanity, the governing authorities will also be called to give an account before God, and who knows but that the faithful testimony of Christians speaking the truth may serve to expose corruption, egoism, and unrighteousness, turning the hearts of those in authority towards God. “So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Peter 4: 19).

Summary and Considerations

In view of the real-life challenges that the preceding discussion can have on our day-to-day existence and circumstances, Paul's admonition for Christians to pray for the authorities and that we might live in peace is proactive and essential.

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (1 Tim 2:1-2)

The governing authorities are God's servants and are responsible and accountable before him to uphold justice within their mandated jurisdictions—i.e., to use their power to ensure fairness, to provide materially for those in need, and to punish or remove those who oppress others. Whereas Christians are mandated to not take revenge and not answer evil with evil, the governing authorities are sanctioned by God to “bear the sword” in their pursuit of justice which may even include both the threat and use of lethal force. In this way, the Bible does not condemn either the upholding of civil justice with the sword (i.e., the police or judiciary) or protecting one's citizens from external aggression with the sword (i.e., the military). As is the case with many other human activities, the fact that a practice is socially acceptable or even condoned by law, does not mean that it a proper behaviour for a follower of Jesus. Even though the governing authorities have their own mandate as God's servant, this does not mean that a Christian can be instrumental to all possible applications. At the same time, Christians have been mandated to financially support, respect, honor and speak truth to “God's other servant.” For both Jesus and Paul, paying taxes and showing respect did not mean that challenging truths were not spoken.

Although society in general and the governing authorities may be positively influenced by Christian witness, example, and teaching, this is a by-product of the ministry of reconciliation and not its central mandate. Instead, as Paul explained to the Ephesian Christians:

... now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. (Eph 5:8b-11)

At the same time, since “everyone who does evil hates the light” (John 3:20), the testimony of Christians are not always appreciated by the world. As a result, the world can respond with malicious talk, abuse,

persecutions, and even physical harm. Sometimes the governing authorities fail to ensure fairness and justice in society and sometimes it is the governing authorities themselves who are responsible for the mistreatment and evil. In some countries, the Christian mandate to love one's enemies, refuse to do harm to them and thereby refuse to take up arms, can be labelled "traitorous" and condemned as criminal by the governing authorities. And in the same way, the Christian mandate to testify to what is true and right and thereby judge governmental action as being unethical, unfair, or unjust, can also be labelled "treasonous" and subject to punishment. Submission to any earthly authority (whether governmental or societal) does not negate the Christian obligation and responsibility to speak the truth in love and respect. Under these circumstances of standing up for what is right and true, Christians are called to endure unjust treatment and "commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 4:19).

Addendum: Reflections on "Love Your Enemies—The Dilemma"

I appreciate and respect the hard work, prayer, and study, that was expended by the brother(s) who produced the second position paper. I believe the biblical texts and observations presented above significantly challenge its proposed framework for argument.

- The introductory illustration of a dilemma is not really accurate since according to Jesus following God's law or following human tradition always has only one right solution—there is no dilemma for the Christian. The real dilemma of this conversation is how does a Christian submit to the governing authorities, when the governing authorities are asking for action unbecoming a Christian.
- By understanding the mandate of "God's other servant" (i.e., the governing authorities) as being distinct and separate to the mandate of God's ministers of reconciliation, the delineation of a personal level and a national level has already been determined by a different means—the societal and national level belong to the governing authorities. Either we are God's servants to punish the evildoer with the sword, or we are God's servants to reconcile the evildoer to God—both activities cannot be done simultaneously, and a choice must be made.
- In making the argument of protecting the innocent, the very line that Jesus was seeking to erase by categorizing people as either our wives/children/brothers/neighbours or our enemies is drawn from the outset. Is it not possible that some of those being classified as "enemies" are also innocent since they are submitting to their own governing authorities in good conscience or possibly even under some form of coercion or duress. If we are going to make an argument about protecting the innocent, then it must include protecting the enemies who may be innocent as well, or "innocence" is not really the criteria being used.
- All the imagery of soldiery and warfare are both necessary and genuine to the understanding of the ministry of reconciliation. This is not a callousness towards violence in the world, but instead a recognition, of the terrible consequences of the battle between good and evil taking place within the human story.