

Prophetic International

The Kingdom of God Suffered Violence?

(Based on Mt. 11:12)

Preface

Many people will not have encountered the supposed principle as discussed below. I can not be sure of its origins but I suspect it is a Pentecostal creation. The temptation to take juicy short quotes and give them an extra or alternative meaning has always proved an irresistible temptation to some Pentecostals. As a Pentecostal pastor I know that pastors regularly pick things up from other pastor's and run with them without checking them out (especially after conferences). It is human nature that once a new variation of theology is created, these meanings are quickly assumed to be acceptable. This happens simply through the virtue of repetition and popularity, especially if it has the outward appearance of truth. One only has to read the theology of current day cults to realize how extreme these things can be, and that it happens far too often. It seems disturbingly easy to achieve, and masses of people then simply learn to reason their way around what they are taught.

The following is a typical example of how Christian ministers can fall for a misleading theology, hook line and sinker.

*(Mt. 11:12) ...the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence,
and men of violence take it by force...*

Current Implied Meanings

There seem to be three standard variations or interpretations of this misleading spiritual violence principle. I imagine the one you prefer will depend on your personality type.

- 1. The Specific Meaning** – We often need to violently grab hold of the God's anointing for ministry (and other) purposes, and therefore the Kingdom suffers violence.
- 2. The Spiritual Meaning** – We need to take hold of what we see beyond the veil and birth it supernaturally into this world; this process often requires spiritual violence.
- 3. The General Meaning** – To develop spiritually in God we need to push beyond our limitations, apparently this requires an assault on the Kingdom of God.

These three basic reasons seem to explain the motivations of those that use this philosophy.

Before we begin this study it is worth pointing out some amusing home truths about any effort of exegesis like this:

1. That there is no reason for those who like to stretch Scripture to stop at these 3 interpretations. After all, why not add some more?
2. I note that there is no particular effort made to justify statements like these when they are made in sermons, even though they require a great deal of justification.
3. Apparently however, it is required of those of us that object to outlandish interpretations like this, that we try and prove why they are unreasonable (I never could understand the logic of that).
4. However, when we go to considerable effort to study and explain why something is a bit

weird, it appears that there is a divine right to completely ignore a Biblically based interpretation in favor of a fancy invented one.

Ho Hum – Such is Life

Motivational Theology

To begin with we should discuss motivations, because it appears that much of our personal belief structure / theology evolves from our general motivation. One normally talks about motivational and personality gifts at this point, but in this case I think it is possible to simplify it all down to a more basic level. At one end of the scale there is are people that normally think "Yes" the end justifies the means, and at the other end of this sliding scale the are those that normally say "No" I can't accept that the end will justify anything!

If you have read anything of mine you will know I am somewhere in thee middle of the "No" half of the scale (but I'm always open to worthwhile theology). As I often say, there is no point twisting Scripture to suit your needs, because there are probably a few more perfectly suitable verses somewhere in the Bible - and if they don't exist at all, then perhaps we should talk about something else?

For me the most interesting thing is that those on the "Yes" side often don't know they have misused Scripture, and often just don't get it when you talk to them. I would like to be nice about this, but it's simply irrational Christianity. Personally I don't know why you bother using Scripture in this way, you'd be better off quoting from the newspaper, that way there is little or no context. You could even take some quotes from the cartoon section. It would give you the added benefit of keeping the congregation amused at the same time.

A Mysterious Phrase

So what does "Suffered Violence" really mean? It is certainly a mysterious phrase, but even a preliminary study of Matthew is enough to suggest some solid theology that is more reasonable than the convenient ideas currently advocated.

The full quote is:

(Mt. 11:12) From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force. (11:13) For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; (11:14) ...he is Elijah who is to come.

Before we even begin, there are few comments to make on this Scripture:

1. We have to admit that there is plenty of context for this quote, so there is no way we can lift a few words out and ignore the rest.
2. With this paragraph alone, we would assume the meaning of this violence to be linked to the context of John the Baptist, Elijah, the Pharisees, Jesus, the Kingdom of God, and the Old Testament prophets in general.
3. Just because Jesus says things happened, we should not automatically assume he agreed or disagreed that they were a good thing. Assumptions like that are simply a mistake. However, he did confirm that the kingdom was suffering violence.

There are a number of interwoven themes in the book of Matthew, and it seems to me that the most relevant theme relating to this matter is the transition between the old and new covenant. This is a new phase in the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

The phrase, "God is doing a new thing" is grossly overdone in the church, but Jesus' arrival was truly one of those defining moments when there was a huge period of transition going on.

From the Days of John

(The transition between the old and new covenant)

The first indication that all is not right with these interpretations of convenience is the opening line of the paragraph.

Jesus identifies the commencement date of the phenomena. We could have a serious debate whether this meant the moment the angel appeared to Zechariah, the moment of conception, birth, or the commencement of John's ministry. One commentary said the magic moment was the fulfillment of his ministry (Jesus baptism), but this seems a little too clinical for me. It marked the beginning of Jesus ministry but it ignores most of John's actual ministry and the importance Jesus himself placed upon the ministry of John.

I prefer to start with the ministry of John because of the fact that:

1. There was a need to be of a certain age (30 years) before being taken seriously.
2. We have a different understanding of history. At the time of Jesus history was more relational; it was more a collection of events. There was less focus on exact dates, they were simply not as important and we must take this into account.
3. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees he used a question about the ministry of John, and made a connection to his own.
4. There was an important period of overlap between the ministries of John and Jesus.
5. The same angel visited in relation to the birth of both people. Gabriel noted that the "ministry" of John would be very important.
6. There is no problem in being both the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets that believed in Jesus.
7. Finally, I'm sure we could all agree on reasons why important changes should start with Jesus, but apparently Jesus believed it all started with John.

This is not just an academic point, considerations like this help a great deal when it comes to understanding the mind of Jesus and various comments he makes. Jesus understood that it had nothing to do with precise dates or instant changes, in fact the New Covenant period involved a long period of transition.

This period of transition also has a few phases. It starts when John as the promised Elijah for his generation, baptizes people and proclaims Jesus as the one who is to come. Jesus proclaims the Kingdom and the New Covenant. He reveals the possibility of a close relationship to the Father. He proclaims his death, resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Disciples grow in number despite persecution. Finally, the Temple is destroyed in 70 A.D.. This completes the first phase of transition. It could be said that we are still in the second phase as wait for the return of Jesus.

The fact that the first phase took many years to complete illustrates the need for us to adopt a big picture view of Biblical history. No matter where we start from, or how many years we include in this first phase, we should appreciate that it requires us to use a big picture view (that does not rely on one or two dates). Likewise, when we approach the subject of the kingdom suffering violence, we need to use a big picture view. Then we will hopefully find a big picture answer that makes theological sense.

This is a large introduction, and I expect that the answers will be brief by comparison. However without this lengthy understanding of the scene, it is not possible to uncover the truth of the matter. Imaginative minds can invent numerous convenient ideas, but I believe that no idea can be accurate unless it takes into account the context (and other relevant passages), local customs and the thoughts of the person speaking (in this case Jesus).

Having read around this subject, I believe chapter three and four of Malachi are directly related

this matter of 'kingdom violence', and the best overall reading. It is recommended reading, because it seems that John, Jesus, and Matthew were very familiar with its themes. They are strongly represented in the Matthew and other material I have included.

A Wider Context

Yes, I agree that the violence mentioned is all about the Kingdom (i.e. Mt 11:12), but the narrative of Malachi and Matthew weave a variation on a very familiar story.

The Malachi reading tells the story of why there is a problem, and why God wants to act. God is not satisfied with our offerings unless they are given from heart felt devotion. The prophet proclaims that God has a long term plan to deal with the situation, but it is a plan with such a long time frame that we think God is doing nothing.

The plan is to send another Elijah (i.e. John the Baptist - Mt. 11:14). Malachi reveals that at just the right time in history God will send a rough but bold prophet that would speak out ("Behold, I will send you Elijah..." Mal 4:5). This rough character would "turn the hearts of fathers to their children" (Mal 4:6). John ministered in an uncompromising way. He was a man of extremes. His solution was a baptism was for repentance of the heart, but when religious leaders tried join in and I imagine tried to gain some control on John's ministry he said, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Mt 3:8) Bear fruit that befits repentance." Like a true prophet he instinctively rejected all attempts to water down the value of what God was trying to achieve.

The choice of using water baptism is very interesting. It seems John understood God wanted to birth something that could not be regulated by laws and statutes. John understood he was preparing the way for Jesus who would, "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Mt 3:12).

Elijah was the prophet that called down the fire of God. John was waiting the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus. He may not have understood what this mass release of the Holy Spirit would mean, but he instinctively knew there would be much change and turbulent times ahead. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was seen as Tongues of fire. The image of fire was deliberate and can not be sanitized so as to exclude an element of violence.

Suffered Violence

Jesus gives us all the clues we need to follow this clearly. He said plainly that the Scribes and Pharisees had shut the kingdom of heaven and would not allow others enter (Mt 23:13, 5:20). This is also a theme in Malachi, and a motivation for enacting God's plan of redemption.

If you are still thinking about a meek and mild Jesus, then think again. Consider the violent language and relevance of these verses:

"Behold, I send my messenger (John) to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek (the Messiah) will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the (Old Testament) covenant in whom you delight, behold, he (the Christ) is coming, says the LORD of hosts" (Mal 3:1).

The Christ "will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the LORD" (Mal 3:3).

"...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Lk 3:16-17).

"And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple..." (Jn 2:15)

Finally, just to make certain we understand the full message, Jesus tells a parable about some tenants that have killed the messengers (the prophets) and will kill the son (the Christ). At that very moment he speaks directly to the chief priests and the Pharisees saying, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it" (Mt 21:43).

This is the meaning of the kingdom suffering violence, and the violent taking it by force. Jesus understood exactly what he was doing. He told the religious leaders boldly that this was happening before their eyes. It was a done deal, and there was nothing they could do to change the process. John refused to allow any compromise, and in his turn Jesus also refused to compromise God's plan of redemption. The veil in the Temple was torn in two. The new covenant was sealed by the death and resurrection of Christ. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost. The Temple was destroyed. We now have access to the Father through the Son. We now have a great High Priest of the order of Melchizedek.

So the answer is simple, forget all the fanciful make believe interpretations, this is extreme spiritual violence on a large scale with a grand achievement. Since the days of John, over a period of some decades, and perhaps culminating in the destruction of the Temple (in 70 AD), the Kingdom has been ripped violently out of the hands of those who prevented people from entering, and has been "given to a nation producing the fruits of it."

Is it Still Happening?

The next big question, and a far more interesting one would be, is it still happening? Some will accept the straight forward truth of this mainstream theology, but also want to keep believing in the out of context options, but is that a valid choice?

I say it's not valid for one very simple reason:

Why do we need to violently appropriate anything in heaven? Come on now, this is a really serious question, why should we need to do that? Don't we have a generous God? Doesn't God desperately want us to succeed in our efforts to proclaim the Kingdom?

The answer is of course YES! The whole point of ripping the kingdom out of the hands of the previous administrators and establishing a New Covenant was to avoid this problem. How many Scriptures are there about "ask and you shall receive?" (Answer = Plenty!)

If we have a problem with receiving, or a problem with implementing what God wants to achieve, **that is our problem! We should fix our problem**, because there is no lack of willingness from God's side. Therefore we do not have to rip anything out of the kingdom. This is really silly stuff. We are the children of the kingdom. We should remember the words of the father to the eldest son when he said: **'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours (Lk 15:31).** Perhaps if we acted more like children of the King we would not fall for such foolish theology.

Therefore let us remind ourselves that citizenship of this nation has nothing to with statutes and regulations or the liturgy and worship we use. The only reason we are a part of this Kingdom and nation is our relationship to the King, and the fruit!

Post Note: There are many other verses that could have been worked into this article. The truth of this main thrust of theology should be plain for all to see. Those that choose to ignore it and prefer their own spin, do so as always for their own motives. However those of us that prefer the solid reality of "context" will not be fazed by this.

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