

Living Our Faith: How Can We Go and Sin No More?

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Abstract: *Since the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks - to establish a global climate change policy - environmentally aware people have come to the realization that humanity cannot act in time to save the earth's inhabitants from the devastating effects of major climate change. Like people trapped in adultery, we are deluding ourselves into believing that our love affair with fossil fuel can be managed, the risks minimized and offset payments levied. For a sustainable future, we must come to terms with our selfish desires. We need to think about all the innocent creatures trapped with us in our unsustainable love affair. We must quickly end our fossil fuel dependency and find healthy ways to sustain our businesses and households, without putting the health and safety of our environment and its family in jeopardy. The purpose of this paper is to explore how to move forward justly, or in Christian terms, how we can go and sin no more, if our governments are incapable of establishing and implementing local and global policies to reduce greenhouse emissions. To serve this end, this paper focuses on the New Testament story of 'The Woman Caught in Adultery'⁵⁵ as an analogy to ask:*

"Should we condemn fossil fuel and join with those who are practicing civil disobedience, such as keying large gasoline cars, to stop oil development? Is civil disobedience justified? Or is there a better way forward that will allow us to develop oil and its by-products in a healthy, safe and just manner?"

Key words: Eco-theology, climate change, climate justice, sustainability

1. Introduction

The 2009 Copenhagen climate talks failed to establish an achievable global climate change policy. Many environmentally aware people have lost hope. They do not think that humanity can act in time to save earth's inhabitants from the devastating effects of major climate change. In a paper I presented in Crete last year, I pointed out how "environmentally aware people have portrayed nuclear power and fossil fuels as bad options that need to be replaced by the good option of renewable energy." (2011) Yet the purpose of that paper was to move our discourse beyond a good/bad dichotomy. Because,

⁵⁵ see John 8.1-11

to create a sustainable future for the planet, we need to consider an array of fuel options, including fossil fuels to create a sustainable energy system for our planet. (Turner 2011) Now, with the failure of the Copenhagen climate talks, environmentally aware people have stepped up their efforts to target oil and coal development as ‘bad things’ to do. The slogan “*leave the oil in the soil*” is ‘a rallying cry’ for many seeking climate justice. (Sandberg and Sandberg 2010) In addition, many climate justice advocates are advocating the practice of civil disobedience, to promote climate justice. Thus, in this paper, I now ask, “*Is civil disobedience justified?*” To serve this end, this paper focuses on the New Testament story of ‘*The Woman Caught in Adultery*’⁵⁶ as an analogy to ask: “*Should we condemn fossil fuel and join with those who are practicing civil disobedience, such as keying large gasoline cars, to stop oil development?*”

This paper begins with the questions what is civil disobedience and what is climate justice? It follows with a discussion of the New Testament story, ‘*The Woman Caught in Adultery*’, in light of the definition of civil disobedience and climate justice. Finally, drawing insight from this story, this paper concludes that civil disobedience is justified when it works toward changing unjust laws and the rapprochement of people separated by conflicting economies, opinions or cosmic ideologies.

2. Living Our Faiths: How Can We Go and Sin No More?

2.1 What is Civil Disobedience?

People typically equate civil disobedience with Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks and their commitment to political change, through passive resistance and non-violence. Peace activists describe Gandhian civil disobedience as ‘passive resistance and nonviolence’ and stress that this form of disobedience “*requires minimal respect and some empathy for the other side’s cause*” (Adam and Moodley 2005). Without respect and empathy, Gandhian civil disobedience resorts to violence in the face of overwhelming violence and injustice (Adam and Moodley, 2005), as evidenced by the struggle to end Apartheid in South Africa. Preaching Gandhian non-violence policy to victims of corruption, violence and injustice did not work and neither did petitioning the government for legislative changes. (Adam and Moodley 2005)

In 1965, Morris Keeton, the Dean of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, published a definition of civil disobedience. His definition clearly distinguishes civil disobedience from riot, rebellion or the evasion of the law. It also distinguishes it from “*exceptional acts permitted by law*” and “*from inadvertent violation of laws.*” (Keaton 1965) The intent and scope of this paper does not permit me to go into every detail of his definition, nor to conduct an exhaustive comparison of other definitions. However, Keeton has provided some key parts that fit within the Gandhian definition that I think are worthy of attention. His definition reads -

“*By an act of civil disobedience, I shall mean an act of deliberate and open violation of law with the intent, within the framework of the prevailing form of government, to protest a wrong or to accomplish some betterment in the society.*” (Keeton 1965)

It goes on to stipulate -

⁵⁶ see John 8.1-11

“...civil disobedience differs from evasion of law in that the violator does not attempt to conceal his violation; on the contrary, (s)he makes a point of being visibly in violation of law.” (Keeton 1965)

And to say further -

“...that visibility of the violation is not sufficient...Civil disobedience is not aimed towards the overthrow of law and order. On the contrary, it works within the framework of the legal system to rectify wrongs. Where the wrongs pertain to the processes of that system itself, the civil disobedient intends not to render the over-all system inoperative with respect to his own act. He may, in fact, want by his act to render their absurdity and injustice more patent.”(Keeton 1965)

Keeton goes on to qualify that rendering, pronouncing the absurdity and injustice of a legal system is not the only reason for civil disobedience. Many instances, according to Keeton, are cases in which the civil disobedient violates an established constitutional law, in order to bring public attention to it and get it ‘declared illegal.’ (1965) And in other instances, Keeton says demonstrators have staged sit-ins to disrupt or interrupt legitimate business or official government offices “with the intent to alter local habits, get more voice in government, or to simply express support for national legislation under consideration.” (1965)

Further to his point of the motivation behind civil disobedience, Keeton cites Martin Luther King and the Lutheran Church in America and their moral justification for non-violent civil disobedience for the advancement of racial equality (1965).

The world has witnessed and taken part in a lot of civil disobedience since Keeton’s definition was published. So how can I even ask, is civil disobedience justified in the pursuit of climate justice? However, I have asked the question because I am concerned about climate justice, and I want to ensure the pursuit of it is undertaken with a clear working definition of civil disobedience and climate justice.

2.2 What is Climate Justice?

The Mary Robinson Foundation defines climate justice as the linking of human rights and development with the equitable sharing of the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolutions (<http://www.mrfcj.org/about/>). Moreover, this foundation maintains that for a climate justice culture to work, the marginal must be given “the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes which are fair, accountable, open and corruption-free.” (<http://www.mrfcj.org/about/>)

Climate justice in the context of climate change asks “Why have the poor and the marginalized been left out’ of the discussions or the engaging actions that concern climate change?” (Warmback 2009) As an ECOTHEE 08 participant, Andrew E. Warmback points out, in countries like South Africa, people are struggling to survive. Thus, when an elite consumptive class promotes climate change as an environmental problem threatening whole ecosystems and then forcibly removes people from ancestral lands to create game parks, this elite class should not be surprised at the outcome. People - without access to land, potable water, fresh air to breathe and an energy source to preserve their food and bodies - dismiss climate change as irrelevant. (Warmback 2009)

Warmback points out the obvious. The growing gap between rich and poor in South Africa, and other southern developing nations, demonstrate how climate justice is linked to systemic political injustice, exacerbated by economic injustice. “Efforts to reverse the effects of climate change are seen to be in the hands of those who are powerful, those who have resources.” (Warmback 2009) Lacking legal power and undeveloped resources, many

poor people look to the Church for justice, for the renewed hope of God's justice through movements that place an emphasis on the agency of the poor to overcome injustice. (Warmback 2009)

L. Anders Sandberg and Tor Sandberg, an environmental studies duo from York University in Canada, attended the 2009 Climate Justice Conference in Copenhagen. They found two narrative records emerging from the Conference. The dominant one assigns "*trust and hope to modern institutions such as the nation state, the corporation, the market, technological fixes, the natural science community...and environmental organizations lobbying...[to reverse] the current trend in carbon emissions.*" (Sandberg and Sandberg 2010) The alternate narrative criticizes the dominant narrative and supports social movements "*that advocate for radical challenges to the forces that profit from the continued exploration and extraction of fossil fuels...and "see their participation [those who profit] in international deliberations as undemocratic and restrictive.*" (Sandberg and Sandberg 2010)

Sandberg and Sandberg met a number of people who view climate change as a symptom of the global economy and its control of powerful elite corporate interests. (Sandberg and Sandberg 2010) Critical of this elite economic view, Sandberg and Sandberg point out –

"[N]ot everyone can afford to retrofit their home with solar panels and windmills and many cannot afford higher fuel cost measures to reduce their fuel dependency and consumption." (Sandberg and Sandberg 2010)

Nations are full of people who are caught or trapped in this global economy that depends upon the development and consumption of fuel. Yet the rallying cry "*Leave the oil in the soil*" is popular in climate justice discourse because people in oil-producing regions seldom benefit from its extraction. (Sandberg and Sandberg 2010) Developed nations are the ones who reap most of the benefits. Yet the developed countries seem unable or unwilling to reduce carbon emissions. Moreover, their economies cannot afford to pay compensation to those developing countries trapped by climate change policies through no fault of their own. (Sandberg and Sandberg 2010)

Climate justice is, indeed, clearly linked with human rights and resource development. Therefore, climate justice and civil disobedience should work together to protest the inequity of the laws and policies that a judicial body upholds. They should work together to protect the rights of those within its own body, but not at the expense of those with few rights or no legitimate power within or outside its constitution.

The New Testament story of *The Woman Caught in Adultery* is an example of civil disobedience. It is also relevant to our quest for climate justice. It lifts up an act of deliberate and open violation of law with the intent, within the framework of the prevailing form of government, to protest and rectify a systemic injustice. In this story, Jesus gets people's attention by writing on the ground - not once, but twice. The people go away. The next time the people gather, Jesus claims to be the '*Light of the World*'. So let us turn to the story as stored fuel, waiting for us to develop it wisely and justly for the benefit of all, not just an elite few.

2.3 The Woman Caught in Adultery

The New Testament story of the '*Woman Caught in Adultery*' appears only in the Gospel of St. John. In the earliest documents attributed to John it was excluded. But it eventually gained acceptance in the official canon. The New Jerusalem Bible reads -

The adulterous woman

"They all went home, and Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

At daybreak, He appeared in the Temple again: and as all the people came to Him, He sat down and began to teach them.

The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in full view of everybody, they said to Jesus, 'Master this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and Moses has ordered us in the Law to condemn women like this to a death by stoning. What have you to say?' They asked him this as a test; looking for something to use against him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with a finger. As they persisted with their question, Jesus looked up and said, 'If there is one of you who have not sinned, let them be the first to throw a stone ...' Then [Jesus] bent down and wrote on the ground again. When they heard this they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest, until Jesus was left alone with the woman, who remained standing there. He looked up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?' 'No one, sir' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus 'go away, and don't sin anymore.'" (John 7:53-8:11)

The next line reads, '**Jesus, the light of the world**' and continues with the following -

"When Jesus spoke to the people again, he said: 'I am the light of the world: anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; he will have the light of life.'" (John 8:12)

As citizens of the world, I invite you to follow Jesus back into the story and look for words and actions that show how Jesus appears as an actor of civil disobedience, bringing the Light of Life to people who walk in the dark.

Remember! Civil disobedience is concerned with racial and gender equality, morality and justice. People practicing civil disobedience sometimes stage events to interrupt or protest regular lawful proceedings. They practice civil disobedience to demonstrate how absurd or how unjust certain social practices, rooted in constitutional law, have become. Civil disobedients bring their leaders along with them to their events fully expecting that they and their leaders will be seen violating a law. They want to get caught and expect that they will be punished. In getting caught, they want two things; firstly, they want everyone to see that this law causes more harm than good. Secondly, they want people to go away convinced that this injustice needs to be rectified and this particular law needs to be declared illegal. (Keeton 1965)

Climate justice seeks to address the world's changing climate in ways that share the burden and the benefits of resource development equitably, to stop and reverse the causes of climate change (<http://www.mrfcj.org/about/>). Advocates maintain that the developed world is getting richer at the expense of the underdeveloped nations. Climate change policies are being carried out by powerful lobbyists, who claim they want to safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable. But often times, these policies seem irrelevant to traditional people, who have been forced from their ancestral lands for the benefit of all, especially when, without access to their ancestral way of life, they get poorer, sicker and weaker, while the lobbyists and their supporters get richer. (Warmback 2009)

The first time I presented the story of '*The Woman Caught in Adultery*,' I left out some background information.

The story begins at sunset upon the conclusion of a religious festival. (John 7:37) The police, the chief priests, and Pharisees report that some prophetic leader was identified as the Christ by a rabble attending the festival. However, people cannot agree about him. (John 7:40-45) So the leaders come to the opinion that this rabble and their Christ know nothing about the Law. (John 7:40-49) Nicodemus challenges their opinion. (John 7:50-51)

He is a Master Teacher of Israel. (John 3:1-10) He has spent the night with Christ. (John 3:1) This night time encounter revealed the mystery of the Spirit to him. (John 3:1-10) Thus Nicodemus speaks with authority and suggests that they give this Prophet a hearing. (John 7:39-51)

All the people go home and Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives. (John 7:53-8:1)

Darkness falls

The curtain rises. It is day-break, He appears again in the Temple. He sits down and begins to teach them. The scribes and Pharisees bring a woman along with them who has been caught committing adultery. They say to Jesus, "*Master, this woman has been caught in the very act of committing adultery and Moses has ordered us to stone women such as this. What do you say?*" (John 8:2-6)

There is an unspoken tension between Jesus - the Master Teacher and the Woman - and the people ordered to condemn women like her to death by stoning? The injustice that the whole temple community is struggling with has far reaching implications. She has been clearly identified as an adulterous woman. Her lover, however, has not been explicitly identified. The tension in the Temple mounts. The community waits to see what will happen next.

Jesus bends down and starts writing on the ground.

As Jesus writes, imagine how the pungent fragrance of the earth filled the nostrils of the people in the Temple. Then imagine yourself looking at her. Can you see His love for her reflected in her eyes? as He says. "*If there is one of you who have not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*" Then, see Jesus bend down and write again on the ground, on the very sacred earth that their Holy Temple is built upon. And then ask yourself, "*Why did the people leave the temple and leave Jesus - the Master Teacher and the Woman - alone with the fragrance of the earth in their nostrils?*" Everyone seems complicit in this sin. No one throws a stone. Yet the Master orders her to go away and not to sin anymore. (John 8:1-11)

By sending her away and telling her not to sin anymore, He burdens her unfairly with the taint of having committed adultery, because He has not clearly identified Himself or anyone else as her lover. He has clearly identified her as a sinner. Yet if He is not her co-respondent, then who is? Justice demands that her co-respondent stand with her and share the same social stigma of adulterer, or if she had little or no say in this affair...then her co-respondent should bear a greater part of the blame.

Consider a more modern example. Consider a keyed car.

2.4 Keying of Cars

The keying of cars sends a powerful message. It says stop - I've just hurt your property and I'll keep on doing this, unless you change. It assumes the car has 'stolen' fresh air. Since the car has no rights, the civil disobedient doing the keying holds the car as ransom and expects the owner to bear the burden of its marred appearance. Thus the car, like a woman damaged with an adulterous image, can still function. Neither one is completely destroyed. But the car, like the woman, bears the scar as a permanent reminder that she has played a key part in act of civil disobedience. The car, not the person damaging her body, bears the burden of this act of civil disobedience. The car is the one blamed for sullyng the ground and robbing it of clean air. But the person damaging the car, or the good reputation of another, in an act of civil disobedience, should stand accountable for their actions. The civil disobedient should expect to pay the penalty.

Women today have rights. They are persons and they are not the property of another person. However, an adulterer today is still treated as if they have ‘cheated’ on their spouse, who is the only one with whom the person may rightly have intercourse. Thus should an adulterer get caught or come clean and admit an affair, their reputation takes a hit. It becomes marred, damaged, as is the case of the ‘*Woman Caught in Adultery*’. Even though Jesus, the Master Teacher, does not condemn her, the words “*go and sin no more*” imply that she sinned, leaving her reputation marred.

Yet, with His own words and actions, the Master Teacher openly admits that He, too, has sinned. Let us not delude ourselves into thinking that the Master Teacher was the only person in all of Israel without sin. He does not throw a stone. Remember, Jesus said. “*If there is one among you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*” Yet because he does not condemn her to death, and because people cannot agree about Jesus’ identity, people fail to see what is obvious to me.

Nicodemus is Jesus, the Master Teacher of Israel, who has legitimate authority and who has orchestrated the ‘hearing’ in the Temple. Yet, Jesus is also the ‘*Woman Caught in Adultery*’, the Prophetic Teacher, brought in for the hearing. Without full agreement as to who Jesus is, people assume that Jesus had no other name but Jesus. They also assume Jesus is the Master, who is sinless. And herein the danger lies.

People thinking of the Master Teacher as the ‘sinless one’ will do as the Master Teacher did and burden his neighbour with the whole messy affair. They will say, *‘The World is running out of pure air, and fossil fuel is to blame. And you, neighbour, you’re the sinner who needs to repent. You are dependent upon gas-spewing vehicles and cheap stuff produced in fossil fuel factories. Get with the programme. Go Green. Go and sin no more before you destroy us.’*

People keying cars are well-meaning. They want fossil fuel consumption to stop. Likewise, well-meaning Christians want adulterous relationships to stop. But both groups are naïve to think that marring a car or maligning a woman caught in adultery with the words “*go and sin no more*” are the ways to ‘*go and sin no more*’. To merely recognize the Master Teacher as a judicial body falls short of justice; showing mercy and holding her, and only her, accountable for the sin of adultery.

To serve justice, especially as the earth’s climate changes, Christians need to recognize both the Master Teacher and the Adulterous Woman, as Jesus who loves the earth. Doing so, Christians will develop and distribute the benefits of the Light equitably amongst all the peoples of the earth. As more Christians realize the truth, the Light will become brighter. People will see them both as the civil disobedient one who ‘chose’ to do ‘the will of God’ and allowed themselves to be caught in adultery to show how absurd, unjust, divisive, and unloving Moses’ command to stone women caught in adultery was/is. Living their faiths and choosing to do the will of God, they went and sinned no more. They became the Sinless One – by joining with them, so can we!

3. Conclusion

Civil disobedience should work toward changing unjust laws and the rapprochement of people separated by political differences, conflicting economies, adverse opinions or cosmic ideologies. When it does, it is justified and can be a powerful motivating force, especially in the face of overwhelming injustice and oppression. However, it is energy and it needs to be used wisely and justly to promote sharing and a genuine respect for human diversity and global harmony. If civil disobedience is used to shame the opposing view and

force it into submission, any hope for lawful change will be met with resistance and conflict. Civil disobedience, in this instance, will be unjustified.

How well we move forward to create a sustainable energy system that includes fossil fuel for those who need it, will depend upon our ability to work toward changing unjust laws, attitudes, and behaviours that have damaged our neighbours' reputations, their property and their communities and kept people from speaking with one another 'face to face'.

We need to stop using, and developing, fossil fuel at the expense of the earth and our neighbours. The phrase '*leave the oil in the ground*' is popular and the keying of cars may gain popularity. But we need to make sure we do not turn fossil fuel into the enemy, as if oil and the development of oil are bad things. Oil is an energy source and we cannot live without energy. In order to find ways to develop and re-use multiple energy sources, including fossil fuel - cleanly, safely, wisely and justly - for the good of all, we need to step up our efforts to respect our neighbours and the earth. In the process, we need to use civil disobedience justly and wisely, so that all may have life. Moreover, we need to use slogans such as '*leave the oil in the ground*' with caution. This slogan and words such as '*go and sin no more*' may condemn many of our neighbours, who have no access to other affordable energy sources - to a life without light - to death.

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