

GUN POLITICS

A Christian Response to the Las Vegas Shooting

By Mike Burnard



“At about 10.08pm local time on Sunday night, 1 October, 64-year-old Stephen Paddock opened fire from the windows of his room on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay hotel, killing 59 people and injuring more than 500 at a country music festival.

Police stormed his room and found he had killed himself. Paddock fired on the crowd for nine minutes, Clark County Sheriff Joseph Lombardo told reporters on Tuesday, adding that investigators have identified all but three of the victims.

Harrowing video footage showed panicked concertgoers fleeing and dropping to the ground as bullets rained down on the Route 91 Harvest Festival on the east side of Las Vegas Boulevard. The shooting sparked mass panic and confusion with gunshots and screams filling the air as Jason Aldean (a country singer) fled the stage and the crowd of more than 22,000 people tried to take cover.” (Telegraph and Express)



*“On Tuesday, 3 October, officials offered new information on Paddock and how he planned the attack. An agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) said that 47 firearms had now been found in three different locations, including the hotel room, and Verde and Mesquite, Nevada. Of those weapons, 12 had devices known as **BUMP STOCKS** attached that allowed semi-automatic rifles to mimic fully automatic gunfire. The agent, Jill Snyder, said officials had determined the devices were legal. The weapons – rifles, shotguns and pistols – were purchased in Nevada, Utah, California and Texas, she said.” (The Guardian)*

The reaction to the Las Vegas massacre was completely different to the reaction to the natural disasters that recently hit the US. The destruction caused by the hurricanes united people across cultural, racial and political borders. But the shooting seemed to highlight an already highly divided society, and political leaders spared no punches as they reawakened the controversial gun-lobby debate.

THE ISSUE

“Gun politics is an area of American politics that is defined primarily by the actions of two groups: gun control and gun rights activists. These groups often disagree on the interpretation of laws and court cases related to firearms as well as about the effects of gun control on crime and public safety. It has been estimated that US civilians own 270 million to 310 million firearms, and that 35% to 42% of the households in the country have at least one gun. (Wikipedia)

The shocking revelation of the Las Vegas shooting was that it was a local resident, unaffiliated to any terror group, that killed his own people without any obvious reason. It was not a radical Muslim, nor was it a terrorist; the shooting apparently had no connection to religion, racism or conviction. It all boils down to the question of how one individual could obtain an arsenal of weapons and how the lack of responsible gun control resulted in the death of nearly 60 people in one shooting. It is true that little is known about Stephen Paddock, his motives and his background. It is also true that if he had no criminal record, he would have been able to obtain guns even under stricter gun laws. But perhaps under stricter gun laws, he may not have been able to assemble such an arsenal of weapons without raising suspicion.

This is without a doubt an issue that needs to be addressed, and probably with a greater urgency than ever before. On Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah (a South African native) observed that *"I've never been to a country where people are as afraid to speak about guns,"* referring to White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders who, among others, said now is not the time for political debate about guns. Noah added: *"When a plane crashes, we talk about plane safety immediately. When a bridge crashes, we talk about infrastructure immediately. We seem to do everything to avoid talking about guns."*

Noah also said that there is a huge difference between natural disasters and mass shootings. *"People speak about mass shootings like they are natural disasters, like there's nothing you can do,"* Noah said. *"There is something you can do."*

Rex Huppke of the Chicago Tribune commented in a similar line, but with a different tone: *"Tighter gun control, on its own, is not the answer. Anyone who carries a bag of guns into a casino hotel room and opens fire on a crowd of concertgoers clearly has a mental health issue that has gone untreated. We're never going to find a magnet big enough to pull all the guns in the country up, and we'll never be able to make it impossible for a lunatic to get hold of guns and take innocent lives. But that's no reason to fall back on prayers and simply hope for an explanation from God. There are steps we can take, on guns and on mental health, and we talk and we talk and we scream and we scream and nothing ever gets done. I have to imagine that God, at this point in America's violent history, has heard enough prayers and is waiting for some to realise that humans were given brains and common sense with the expectation that those things would come in handy. Maybe God is wondering why we keep praying and don't start using our heads."*

To use this massacre as an example of gun control that has spun out of control is not only valid but extremely necessary. There are, however, two considerations for those who seek to not only address issues of importance, but also to speak life in times of need: timing and attitude.

THE TIMING

In an article in the *Weekly Standard*, the editors summarise the challenge of "responding with wisdom" as follows: *"Responding to tragedy is never easy, but the best response is often the one involving the fewest words. That's true when a friend receives terrible news—nothing's worse than the loudmouth uncle trying to be 'helpful'—and it's true in moments of national grief like the present one. There's something deeply unbecoming about the habit of blabbing censorious political opinions while people are still dying. Social media and 24-hour news encourages the habit, but it's an unlovely one and ought to be resisted, especially by those with prestige and influence."*

Sadly, many activists and Christian commentators also used social media to voice their frustration, sometimes with a bigger desire to be right than to be kind. The cause may be legitimate, but in light of this tragedy, it is important to guard against self-obsessed opportunistic opinions that disregard the real victims, those who have suffered loss or pain.

THE ATTITUDE

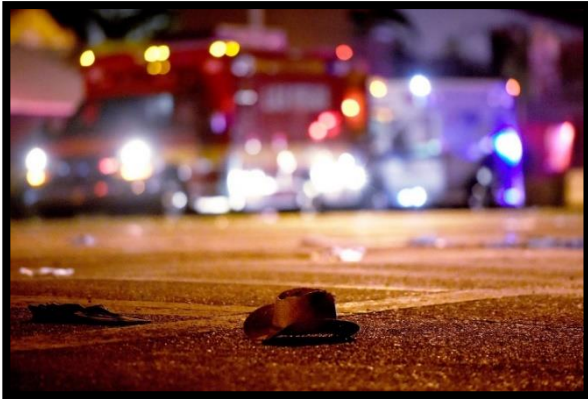
The content of all Christian conversation, whether in agreement or in protest, should always be *"full of grace, seasoned with salt"* (Colossians 4:6). Christians should not react in the same way as those who speak without the guidance and the control of the Holy Spirit. We are called to reveal a *"soundness of speech that cannot be condemned"* (Titus 2:8) and to *"set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity"* (Timothy 4:12).

Maybe the White House press secretary is right in saying that now is not the time for political debate about guns, or maybe Trevor Noah understands the urgency better when calling for an immediate discussion. From a Christian perspective, the issue is not the primary concern but rather one's attitude. How we, as Christians, respond to tragedies of this nature will ultimately reflect "the Father of all compassion" in a way that is needed in times of mourning. We need to remind ourselves that it is better to be kind than it is to be right.

Here are FOUR guidelines as we respond to critical issues in times of pain:

- Guard against moralising the spiritual
- Guard against seeking a scapegoat
- Guard against becoming the victim
- Guard against opportunism

1. Guard against moralising the spiritual



US President Donald Trump, very early in his response to the shooting, termed it “an act of pure evil” and quoted from the Psalms soon thereafter, proclaiming that “The Lord is close to the broken-hearted, He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.”

By speaking about the act being “evil” and also by using a Biblical reference, Mr Trump (whether consciously or not) highlighted the spiritual nature of such an act. Albert Mohler, a Southern Baptist seminary president, argued in response to the killings in Las Vegas: “*Evil is a Biblical category. It can only be fully understood from a spiritual perspective.*” Mohler wrote in a 2

October commentary: “*The secular worldview cannot use the word with coherence or sense. The acknowledgement of evil requires the affirmation of a moral judgment and a moral reality above human judgment. If we are just accidental beings in an accidental universe, nothing can really be evil. Evil points to a necessary moral judgment made by a moral authority greater than we are – a transcendent and supernatural moral authority: God.*”

It is important to remember that spiritual matters need to be governed by a Biblical response, and not simply by a moral one, based on convictions or principles that may not be Biblically-governed in all circumstances.

2. Guard against seeking a scapegoat

The concept of ‘scapegoating’ originally comes from Leviticus, in which a goat was designated to be cast into the desert with the sins of the community. Other ancient societies had similar practices. In psychology and sociology, the practice of selecting someone as a scapegoat has led to the concept of ‘scapegoating’.

The first human response to any human tragedy, sometimes even before the shock of human loss sets in, is to identify a culprit. This was the first response by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and still haunts humanity today: “The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it’” (Genesis 3:12).

It seems like there is always a sense of comfort in finding a scapegoat that could be held responsible for an inexplicable act of horror. The first assumption when the news first broke on our TV screens, even without questioning, was that it was another Islamic terror attack. We thought we knew who the guilty party was, which allowed the horror to ‘make sense’. There is always a sense of relief when the guilty party is identified and the normal accusations can follow. However, when Stephen Paddock proved to be unrelated to Islam, another scapegoat had to be found, and the most obvious villain – in the eyes of many Americans – was the current US leadership and their inability to secure a safer society.

The entertainer, Lady Gaga, told her fans that “blood is on the hands of those who have power to legislate”. And was the CBS vice-president was fired for writing on her Facebook page: “If they wouldn’t do anything when children were murdered I have no hope that Repugs will ever do the right thing. I’m actually not even sympathetic [because] country music fans often are Republican gun toters.” Trevor Noah said that he could not give his “thoughts and prayers” to the victims of the shooting, but instead only an apology: “I’m sorry that we live in a world where there are people who will put a gun before your lives.”

When scapegoats are identified, rationality often flies out of the window. Christians should offer comfort, not by pointing to the guilty but by pointing to Christ even before addressing the issues at hand.

3. Guard against becoming the victim

In an interview on CNN, one security advisor made a comment that once again proved that we often find it impossible to separate ourselves from the pain of others. When asked to describe the security on the square where the shooting took place, he described in detail how he walks that road often, that he was there quite recently and that he could actually have been one of the victims on that specific day. In his mind, he suddenly became a victim.

Sadly, when seeing ourselves as a possible victim, we lose sight of the pain of others. This principle also applies to issues of national concern, like gun control. Suddenly, America became the victim while millions remained untouched by the tragedy. The victims are those who were directly affected by the shooting: the loved ones of those killed, and those traumatised by being present. Christians should be careful not to see themselves as victims simply because they are part of the community that is shaped by laws that might have provided a platform for the horror to happen.

4. Guard against opportunism

There are always those who will seek to exploit a tragedy of this nature for political or religious gain. The first to respond was the Islamic State militant group (IS) who claimed responsibility on Monday for the shooting, saying that Paddock had converted to Islam months ago. The jihadi group released the claim on its self-styled news agency *Amaq*. It typically uses this platform for official claims of responsibility.

According to *Newsweek*, a cyber-monitoring company that monitors jihadi activity (Jihadoscope) translated the statement from Arabic as follows: "Attacker of the #Las_Vegas shooting is a soldier of the Islamic State and carried out the operation in response to targeting coalition countries."

However, a US official (unauthorised to speak publicly and speaking on condition of anonymity) told *Newsweek*: "There is no indication that there is any link whatsoever. They claim a lot of things." The FBI said that "no connection" between Paddock and radical Islamist extremism had been found.

But political leaders did not stand too far behind in their endeavours to use this opportunity for political gain. Hillary Clinton urged Americans to "stand up to the NRA" and "try to stop this from happening again." Senator Chris Murphy (Democrat-Connecticut) told his congressional colleagues their "cowardice to act [sic] cannot be whitewashed by thoughts and prayers... none of this ends unless we do something to stop it."

These are all valid and legitimate claims and concerns and should be voiced at one time or another, but Christians should be wary of jumping on any bandwagon in trying to make a point.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Just as we see in gun politics, there is even the danger of opportunistic approaches in sharing the Gospel.

Pastor Chris Marlin from Grace City [Church] in Las Vegas responded as follows: *"The thing I've learned most in my few years here (in Las Vegas) is to not come in—especially in times like this—with an agenda. As people are vulnerable (and this is such a time for Kingdom expansion), I don't want to just let people get through their stories so I can jump straight to how Jesus fixes that. I want to truly be invested in what they're saying. And of course, I'm going to present the Gospel because that's the only thing that truly heals, but I think if we come in with too heavy of an agenda...I think we could maybe do more wounding than even help. But if we truly love the person in front of us—and it's slower and it's less efficient, but it's more real—then we might help fewer people because it's going to take longer, but Jesus really loved the one who was in front of Him. I think really not coming in with an agenda to shell out the Gospel as quickly as we can but actually listen and then say, 'How would Jesus respond in this incident?' It might be slower than we would like.*

No one wants you to be selling them something in the midst of tragedy. If our primary objective is to love that person, the Gospel will follow as a natural outflow instead of as, 'you're vulnerable, let me push this on you.'"

This should be our attitude in addressing issues of concern, whether it be gun control, salvation or healing.

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