



Should Christians be involved in industrial action?

BY ANDREW CAMERON

“SLAVES, OBEY your earthly masters in everything” (Colossians 3:22).

So no strikes for Christians then.

Except for the fact that I don’t know any Christians who are slaves. Oh, sure, we all feel like slaves sometimes. But you have never had money paid to make you someone’s property. Your life is not forfeit if you don’t show up for work. Since we’re not actually slaves, there may be more to it. Sure, there’s a parallel—the slave’s master was also his employer. But we had better honour Paul’s words if we insist that ‘slave’ means ‘slave’; and what makes this ‘Hard Ask’ hard, is that, as a modern employee, you have certain ‘freedoms’ that no slave ever had: the freedom to quit, to question your employer—or to withhold your labour (a ‘strike’).

So we need more of the Bible than Colossians 3:22 to ‘decode’ these ‘freedoms’. But not so fast—for Colossians 3:22 is actually very, very subversive. The slave obeys rigorously—but unrelated to the master’s supervision or pleasure. Why? Because this Christian slave is working for Christ now; and working for Christ includes treating your master no longer just as a master. Slavery for Christ includes conducting relationships with faithfulness and love, wherever possible. So these new, Christian slaves totally undermine certain major presumptions in slavery. The master is only a secondary authority compared to Christ; yet the same master is to be loved as precious! At your workplace, your identity as a worker is up for grabs. Are you just a labour-unit, an expendable commodity for exploitation by Capital? Or are you a self-motivated winner, in whom Capital believes

and invests, so you can live in comfort while pursuing your goals? This old debate between Marxism and the ‘free-market’ isn’t going to go away quickly, and the seeming truth of either position probably depends largely upon the tone of your own workplace. But I suspect the Christian’s task is to subvert both ideas, by insisting that all relationships are meant to thrive when there is faithfulness and love.

So for the Christian, even terrible employers are (amazingly) to be treated as precious—and yet also as a distant second in authority to Christ. So also are co-workers to be treated as precious. If a workplace has problems, there may be many ‘industrial actions’ other than striking by which to solve it. A ‘strike action’ has to be recognised for what it is: an act of economic coercion. Not all acts of coercion are wrong in the Bible, but they are certainly always the sad, sad option of last resort. The Christian must evaluate whether this particular case of coercion is appropriate.

But long, long before then, wherever possible, the Christian will feverishly work on alternative ‘actions’ to reconcile whatever breakdown in relationships has triggered the problem. (Is this part of what Jesus meant by ‘peacemaking’ in Matthew 5:9?) The Christian could ponder aloud with other workers, and lead the way into other options. Has the employer been communicated with seriously and respectfully about the worker’s lot and how a few simple changes might un-poison the whole atmosphere? Has the Christian written directly to the employer describing what he sees and explaining why he reckons his workmates are going berserk? Or reminded the employer that he’ll make more money with happy workers? (But you *mustn’t* only write that—that’s mere utilitarianism. Add the far more important reasons to provide for a worker’s well being, such as the pursuit of loving,

faithful relationships).

Has the Christian suggested to his co-workers that a pay-rise (if that’s what the strike is about) might not actually answer their problems—that the language of money cannot touch some reasons for workplace unrest? And, in some critical service areas, must the Christian insist that the strike cannot be carried out for the sake of (shock, horror) the customers or the public? In short: has the Christian been ‘innocently subversive’ in their own ‘industrial action’? That said, there will sadly be circumstances of employer ‘faithlessness’ where coercion becomes a sad, last resort—such as some unsafe work practices. But conversely certain pay claims might require, painfully, that the Christian keep working.

Theologian Miroslav Volf is a Serbian, who has been forced to consider Christian responses in the most extreme situations of conflict. He sees in 1 Peter an amazing epistle targeted almost directly at us. We, like them, are the marginals in their culture; but the examples Peter gives are of Christians constructively responding in a variety of ways to a complex situation. Sometimes they endorse and work with what they see, sometimes they subvert it, and sometimes they oppose it. There is what Volf calls a ‘soft difference’ about them—not soft as in ‘weak’, but as in the kind of difference that pushes against the culture to change it from within. The Christianity of 1 Peter never entirely rejects culture, but is never comfortable with it either. There is an amazing kind of freedom there as Christians weigh up the issues, their options, and then act on the basis of their “new birth into a living hope” (1:3).

So as industrial action looms, be “innocently subversive” and “softly different”—and maybe read 1 Peter a few times in advance for some brilliant examples and instructions in the matter. **B**