

Cooperating with God in Risk Reduction, Physical and Digital

A Short Introduction to a Biblical Theology of Risk and Information Security

Introduction

In addressing the Biblical view of risk, we must first understand that taking the love of Jesus to the world will involve taking risks. But we must have a balanced view of both taking on risk and being wise to reduce risk when appropriate; we must avoid the extremes that can arise from a faulty understanding of the Bible. After coming to a Biblical view of managing risk, we can then look at how this understanding should be applied to information and computer security.

Jesus Christ is Worth the Risk!

As a believer in the good news of Jesus Christ, God calls us to live a life of risk, courage, and adventure as we take up our cross and follow Him (Matt. 10:16; Luke 10:25-37; Acts 1:8; Matt. 10:38-39). We have access to the most valuable of all possessions: being in relationship with the living God through our Savior, Jesus Christ. The wonderful privilege of knowing Christ and obtaining His salvation makes all else seem like garbage in comparison (Phil. 3:7-8).

As those enjoying this glorious relationship, we have both the privilege and obligation to inform others of the opportunity to come into right relationship with the living Creator God (Matt. 28:19). Our endeavors to make the love of God known to others, by sharing the good news of Jesus or through acts of kindness and mercy, require courage and will put us into risky situations. This risk may include loss of reputation, respect, and position, and may mean being put in prison, incurring physical harm, or even death.

Do we have the courage to cross the street to show the love of Jesus to our neighbors? Do we have the courage and boldness to cross the ocean to share the love of Jesus with those who have never heard the good news of God's saving grace in Christ? Both kinds of endeavors will include experiences of joy and satisfaction, as well as pain and persecution. But we must be brave, bold, and courageous for the gospel, not living in fear of persecution or of experiencing harm for Jesus' sake. We need to be willing to risk losing our reputation, belongings, and well-being to follow the Spirit's leading to minister Christ to those in need. Following Jesus and participating in his ministry of grace to others could indeed mean suffering loss (Phil. 1:29; 3:10). But we can know God's joy, power, and His presence amid that suffering (1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:8; Rom. 8:36; Phil. 1:29).

Biblical Risk Reduction Expectations

Although God calls us into risky situations for the sake of spreading the good news of Jesus (Acts 20:22-24) and for strengthening believers (Acts 14:19-22), He does not call us to be foolish or ignorantly careless (Matt. 10:16). When it is certain that we would experience great harm or death, then both Biblical teachings and examples show that God would expect us to cooperate with Him to "flee" the situation, so as to preserve our ministry for those willing to hear (Matt. 10:23). This is the normal Biblical teaching and example, unless there is some special revelation from God where he is asking us to suffer or even die for His sake (Acts 7:54-60), or to trust Him to deliver us supernaturally (Acts 4:19-20; 5:18-21; 12:6-7; 14:19-20).

In fact, having such a commission from Christ that by definition puts us in the midst of danger and risk (Matt. 10:16 "sheep among wolves"), we should use wisdom to reduce unnecessary risk (Matt.

10:16 “wise as serpents”). We should not foolishly increase risk, nor live oblivious to our surroundings so as to cause a risky situation to escalate to the point where we may unnecessarily experience great pain or loss of ministry opportunities. We must use our God-given wisdom to reduce risk to avoid unnecessary persecution and thus allow our ministry to continue unhindered.

Therefore, we should do our best to understand the risk (risk assessment) and use godly wisdom and the Spirit’s leading to know whether to (1) take on the risk, (2) use practical means to reduce the risk while still completing the task, or (3) avoid the risk situation and forgo the ministry opportunity in that particular time and location.

Two Extremes based on Misunderstanding

Someone with an incomplete or inaccurate understanding of a Biblical view of risk may fall into one of two different extremes, both of which are pitiful and wasteful. One extreme is that a person may not realize that all followers of Jesus are called to risk and a denial of themselves. Thus, I wonder how many people have not heard and responded to the good news of Jesus because Christian workers or average churchgoers were not willing to step out in faith into a risky situation when it was God’s will that they do so? They were unwilling to give up their life of comfort, their money, their reputation, respect by others, the security and stability of a well-paying job, their comfortable financial position, or to risk persecution or physical suffering for the sake of the good news of Jesus. Or committed Christian workers were not willing to follow God into difficult and risky situations, but instead went to easier-to-reach peoples where there was not as much chance of persecution, suffering, or failure. This behavior may show a failure to understand that God calls us to risk, courage, and adventure for the sake of sharing the good news of Jesus and building up the Body of Christ.

Conversely, others may believe that we should ignore the consequences of risk and rush headlong into dangerous situations, trusting God to protect them supernaturally if He so chooses. Thus I wonder how many Christian workers have needlessly suffered or died, or how many ministries have been shut down, because workers didn’t use godly wisdom to (1) do a thorough risk assessment, or (2) listen to God’s Spirit who was warning them to flee, or (3) who thought if they did something practical (like leaving a risky situation or reducing the risk) that they were not trusting God, or (4) thought that “trusting God” meant they foolishly stand in the face of imprisonment or death? Although it is possible the Lord may call us to literally lose all for the sake of following Christ, showing reckless behavior may possibly be due to an inadequate understanding of Jesus’ words to “flee” a risky situation in order to preserve our ministry for those willing to hear.

Biblical Teaching and Examples of Handling Risk

The Biblical experience of “trusting God” in the midst of a risky or dangerous situation does not mean that we sit by passively and expect God to miraculously protect us from all harm, or that we allow ourselves to be imprisoned, tortured, or needlessly killed; but it involves using practical means to cooperate with God in faith. Expecting God to miraculously deliver us from a deadly situation, when we could just have easily avoided it, is paramount to “tempting God,” like Jesus refused to do when he would not throw himself off the temple (Matt. 4:5-7). The normal Biblical practice of handling a life-threatening risk situation was to use human means and godly wisdom to cooperate with God to preserve lives and ministries. This does not mean we live in fear of suffering or persecution, nor does it mean we are “not trusting” in the living God to protect and preserve us; but it seems God most often uses human cooperation with his divine wisdom to accomplish his will.

Jesus teaches clearly in Matthew 10:16-23 that he is sending us into dangerous and risky situations, as sheep among wolves. He does not then say to “just trust God”, but rather instructs us to be as wise as serpents. He then says clearly that when we are persecuted, we should flee that area so we are able to bring the message of his kingdom to others. Passively ignoring the risk of a dangerous situation is not viewed as godly or wise, but rather is disobeying Jesus’ clear instruction. Following Jesus means taking practical steps to escape the danger.

This kind of human cooperation in reducing risk is clearly illustrated in the life of Jesus, as well as the Apostle Paul. For instance, as clearly stated in John 11:53-54 and in John 7:1, when Jesus knew that certain people were trying to kill him, he avoided going to that area. Jesus surely was not living in fear, nor was he unwilling to suffer and die to fulfill his ministry. Rather, he knew that his Father God was not asking him to lay down his life at that time. Jesus used human wisdom and very practical actions (avoiding that area), rather than walking in among these people and expecting God to miraculously rescue him.

Similarly, as seen in Acts 14:5-7, when Paul and the apostles learned that people meant to mistreat and possibly kill them, they fled that area so they could continue to carry out their ministry of spreading the good news of Jesus in a different location. Just as Jesus did, the apostles used very practical means to avoid the situation. They were not living in fear. Nor did their actions mean they were not trusting God. Rather they were obeying the words of Jesus to flee when they were persecuted so they could continue their fruitful ministry. They cooperated with God by following the prompting of the Holy Spirit and using their God-given, human wisdom to preserve and further their ministry.

There are many other Biblical examples of using practical human actions to reduce risk, such as when Paul was lowered down in a basket during the night to escape the Jews who were seeking to kill him (Acts 9:24-25), or when the disciples sent Paul away from Jerusalem when they found out the Jews were again trying to kill him (Acts 9:30), or when the disciples would not let Paul enter into the tumultuous assembly in Ephesus (Acts 19:30). In all these Biblical examples (and many others), surely Jesus and Paul were trusting in God, faithful to God, and not operating out of fear. Although they were willing to suffer and die for their faith, they used God-given wisdom, advice from other believers, and very practical means to reduce the risk for the sake of fulfilling their ministries.

Information Security

Many of the clear Biblical teachings and examples listed above show the proper use of physical actions to reduce risk for a Christ-follower. Furthermore, at least one New Testament passage shows the importance of information security in the life and ministry of a Christian. Acts 23:12-24 describes how the Apostle Paul’s nephew heard of a plot by the Jews to kill Paul. He told his nephew to secretly take this information to the military commander. When the nephew told the plot to the Roman commander, he instructed the nephew not to tell anyone that he was made aware of the plot (Acts 23:22); he recognized the importance of keeping this confidential. Paul was removed from the dangerous situation that very night. If the murderous group had found out about the unwanted or unauthorized access to this information, they could have adjusted their plans to kill Paul. Their plot was thwarted because of a breach of confidential information.

This example clearly illustrates that handling information (either wisely or poorly) may have real physical consequences and ministry implications. If this information would have remained confidential, not overheard by Paul’s nephew, and not used in a wise manner, then apart from God’s miraculous intervention Paul could have very well been killed at that time. It is instructive to see that

Paul recognized the potential value of this information and, rather than ignoring it and passively trusting in God's supernatural rescue, wisely used the information to reduce the risk to his life. If Paul had not lived, he would never have had the opportunity to write most of his New Testament letters and the church throughout history would have suffered by not having his rich insights. However, as it turned out, God used the proper handling of this information to greatly reduce the risk to Paul's life and thus allow him to fulfill his ministry (2 Tim. 4:7).

Information Technology and Digital Risk Reduction

We live in a world where technology has become a part of our daily lives and ministries. The world is connected through the Internet. Our digital footprint (information we store locally or transmit online) can have very tangible effects on the continuation of our ministry, on our physical safety, and on the well-being of the people to whom we minister. For example, the name of a new Christ-follower stored on our computer, or a picture posted on social media of someone seeking the truth, may lead to people being thrown into prison or killed.

In the same way that Biblical risk reduction on a physical level is considered godly and wise, it can be understood that using modern computer security practices to reduce risk, preserve our ministries, and protect the lives and well-being of believers in Christ, would be considered a godly and Biblical practice. Biblical instruction would teach us that we should apply godly wisdom and human knowledge to reduce the risk of actual harm that may come to us or others by protecting the confidentiality of sensitive information. Although it may seem challenging and take extra effort to educate ourselves on computer security principles and practices, not handling private information wisely is tantamount to testing God (Matt. 4:5-7) by expecting him to supernaturally protect the information and deliver us from harm. Just as we might use practical means to deal with physical risk, we should use wisdom to do threat assessments and apply adequate computer security principles and techniques to reduce digital risk.

Resources

This paper is meant to provide a Biblical understanding of how to view and address risk, including the need to apply practical computer security techniques. However, it does not provide training in modern computer security practices or technologies. That topic is too expansive, and it depends on the user's threat profile and individual needs. Although there are a few resources listed below, you are encouraged to reach out to godly-minded, computer security experts.

Practical Resources for Implementing Computer Security and Reducing Digital Risk

- (1) Surveillance Self-Defense: ssd.eff.org/module-categories/basics
- (2) Seven Steps to Digital Security: ssd.eff.org/en/module/seven-steps-digital-security
- (3) Computer and Smartphone security: www.ComputerSecurityNW.com - Free Resources. See:
(1) Essential Computer Security for Home and Small Business Users, (2) Essential Smartphone Security, and (3) resources under Security for Small Businesses.
- (4) Excellent resources for international workers who want to apply appropriate cybersecurity, based on their threat profile: www.ExpatDigital.com - Paid subscription required.

- (5) Understanding the Privacy of Mobile Phones: ssd.eff.org/en/playlist/privacy-breakdown-mobile-phones
- (6) Communicating with Others: ssd.eff.org/en/module/communicating-others - Choosing tools, appropriate phones/computers, understanding encryption and text messages, etc.
- (7) Security for businesses: CIS Critical Security Controls: www.cisecurity.org/controls

More Resources for Understanding a Biblical Theology of Risk

- (1) Facing Danger: A Guide through Risk, by Anna Hampton
- (2) Why God Calls us to Dangerous Places, by Kate McCord
- (3) The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected, by Nik Ripken
- (4) The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure, & Courage, by Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch