

Why should we take moral direction from Max Lucado?

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In the whirlwind of words that have followed the Newtown tragedy, one prominent religious voice has been Max Lucado, a Texas pastor and best-selling author. CNN's Belief Blog interviewed him for its first response to the trauma. The *Huffington Post* ran a Christmas prayer from him during these dark days. And Lucado's words are being quoted by folks like Jim Denison at the *Christian Post*.

There is nothing particularly troubling about Lucado's responses themselves. He told CNN that pastors would have to rework their sermons for Sunday. He prayed at HuffPo that somehow, someday Christ would be born "anew in us." But in these sad times, when we search for moral voices to follow, we may want to consider the source. In this case, we may find that Max Lucado's own work has contributed to our culture of violence—even gun violence.

Lucado's breakout book *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior* includes an entire chapter on Bernie Goetz. You may not remember, but in the 1980s, Goetz shot four alleged muggers in the New York City subway. He was white; they were black. Goetz's gun was unregistered; it was not legal for him to have it or to use it. He was found guilty on several counts but served less than a year in prison. He became a National Rifle Association poster child.

Goetz's trial and story became a lightning rod for New Yorkers tired of city violence and their feeling of powerlessness. The case was profoundly complicated, as it drew together issues of race, crime and violence. In *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*, Lucado tried to make spiritual sense of it.

Lucado explains why so many Americans fell in love with Goetz. Goetz—part "Robin Hood" and part "Lone Ranger"—was "an unassuming hero." Lucado even concludes that "no one can blame the American public for applauding the man who fought back."

For Lucado, Goetz was a symbol of our human condition: we're mad; we want vengeance. In fact, his thoughts about Goetz ultimately echo his Christmas-prayer

response to the Newtown killings. Lucado pivots from Goetz's anger to Christ's forgiveness, and the book's ultimate point is that God acts in holy ways when we only act in heroic ways (as Goetz did, in Lucado's take).

At no point does Lucado mention the racial dynamic of subway shooting. At no point does he mention the illegality of Goetz's concealed weapon. And at no point does he acknowledge that other Americans, especially many African Americans, were profoundly disturbed by the public adoration for Bernie Goetz.

More crucially, Lucado shows no interest in who the alleged muggers were (the men shot) or why they were supposedly stealing. He shows no moral or spiritual interest in anyone but the illegally armed vigilante.

But now we're supposed to listen to his prayers, to take moral direction from him? By lionizing Bernie Goetz, Max Lucado offered moral cover for groups like the NRA to push their agenda—that guns can make us heroes, that they can be useful in moral campaigns. In this moment of high-pitched anxiety and profound searching, we would do well to consider carefully from whom we take spiritual counsel.