

Violence

by Glenn (Woody) Dalton

Violence is epidemic in our world. In North America, murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and burglary have reached alarming levels in the past decades. Even more alarming is the violence in the home—all kinds of abuse to children, spouses, and even parents. And terms like “road rage” have become a part of our everyday terminology, with acts of violence on the highways becoming more and more common.

Violence is not new to mankind. The Scriptures trace humanity’s violent tendencies back to the beginning, in the book of Genesis. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the fruit, their relationship with God was damaged. Immediately, human relationships began to deteriorate.

Not long after the Fall came the first recorded incident of physical violence. Cain, realizing his brother Abel’s sacrifice was more pleasing to God, killed his brother in a fit of jealous rage. Murder had been introduced to the human race. Bible writers took great pains to point out that by the time Cain’s great-great-grandson Lamech came along, violence had escalated and was actually being celebrated. Lamech freely boasted of his prowess in massive, unproportional acts of violence.

It is important to see Lamech’s boast in light of the law of Moses. God gave Moses the principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” in order to limit violence. Justice is the principle of proportionality—not a life

for an eye or mutilation for a tooth. The law of Moses was God’s first step in dealing with mankind’s violent ways by primarily insisting on justice. It does not eliminate violence by law, but does curb it.

God’s final directive in dealing with violence is given by Jesus Christ in Matthew 5:38, 39: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Christ goes on to say in the same chapter (verses 43, 44), “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

In these few verses, Christ raised mankind’s strategies for dealing with violence to a whole new level. No longer are Christ’s followers to deal with their enemy’s violence on the basis of justice only, which emphasizes proportional retaliation, but also on the basis of love. Christ reveals that God’s ultimate will for dealing with violence is not retaliation, but reconciliation.

Christ rejects violence as a realistic means to reconciliation. He does so for at least two reasons. First, Jesus plainly stated, “. . . all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). The law of continuity is at work: fire produces more fire, hate produces more hate, violence fosters more violence. Second, violence does not address

the real, underlying problems involved in any conflict. Violence is an attack against the person; it does not really deal with such underlying problems as fear, hate, and poverty. To assume that violence is the answer to personal, political or social problems would be a gross simplification. Violence eliminates understanding and, therefore, also reconciliation.

In modern society, loving one's enemies, turning the other cheek, and accepting persecution are honorable ideals, but they are viewed as impractical and unrealistic in a fallen world filled with great evil. People often ask, "What would you do if someone was breaking into your house, or attempting to rape your wife, or about to kill your grandmother? Don't you have to use violence in those situations, even if you are a Christian?"

Such questions demonstrate how integral violence has become in mankind's coping processes. In such instances, the questioner often assumes that the only real options are "kill or be killed." John H. Yoder, in his book *What Would You Do?*, points out that there are a number of options open to a Christian even in the most dangerous of predicaments. The Christian, if he sees a person about to attack his mother or wife, can attempt to think of some way to disarm the attacker emotionally. "It might be a loving gesture, a display of moral authority, or by undefensive harmlessness which might disarm him psychologically.... If money is what he wants, I could hand it over." There are testimonies that show such tactics can be successful.

Yoder also makes another major point concerning the practicality of loving one's enemies. The questioner in the what-if scenario assumes that violent intervention will be successful. Yoder points out that if one attempts to protect a member of the family from a violent attacker by means of violence,

and those violent means fail, the situation is now far worse than before. The enemy has been further enraged and is more likely to kill.

It should be noted that love does not eliminate non-violent protective measures. Locking one's doors, staying away from needlessly dangerous situations, and running for one's life are not anti-Christian strategies. Child- and spouse-abuse victims should seek professional help and may need to use some sort of shelter. Such actions should not be seen as unloving, but as first steps toward rehabilitation for both the abuser and the abused. Even for the most noble causes (like Peter protecting Jesus on the night of His arrest), our Lord vetoes violence. Jesus is not seeking victories that injure and destroy people, but victories in which love overcomes evil.

Non-violent love should not be interpreted as mere passivity. Christ's goal is to overcome the evil in people through conversion. To kill one's enemy is to take away any possibility of repentance and conversion. The ultimate testimony of Christ's love is to treat an aggressor as a human being, capable of a moral and spiritual transformation of heart. The Bible calls us to act toward our enemies as Christ did toward His. Let us never forget that although we were once Christ's enemies, we are recipients of His transforming love.

Perhaps at no other time is our faithfulness to Christ tested as severely as when called upon to love an enemy. In the final analysis, the choice for the Christian is between violence and the resurrection. Belief in the fact that our lives are in the hands of a risen Savior, and that death (perhaps our violent death) has been overcome on the cross, means we can follow Christ as He calls us. And loving our enemies may cost us as much as it did Christ.