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THE BIBLICAL ATTITUDE TOWARD VIOLENCE

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*A timely examination of the uses of
violence in the Bible and the implications
for Christian education.*

There are several observations concerning violence in America that give occasion for this paper. First, the angry wave of violence is rising in the United States rather than subsiding, in spite of massive efforts of government, private agency, church and social organizations to contain it. Second, rioting and looting are only one wave of the rising tide of violence that increasingly threatens the American society. Evidence suggests an increase of crime across the widest spectrum of American life. The United States Court of Appeals, Judge Warren E. Burger reported recently that "people murder others in this country at the rate of more than one for every hour of the day. There are more than 140 crimes of theft every hour: assault, violence and rape grow comparably." Since the large amount of crime is committed by persons under 20, I suggest that the worst is yet to come. Violence is reflected in novels, plays, T.V., even Saturday morning children's cartoons. No wonder *Esquire* magazine asked recently, "Why are we suddenly obsessed with violence?"

There are many suggestions given why America is racked by violence. The following list is neither sequential nor is it substantiated by statistics. (1) The intensification of the frustrated hopes of many caught up in the black revolution. (2) Poverty and

despair (by both white and black) is a significant factor for violence. (3) The depersonalization of people and the emphasis on society and urbanization may cause violence. (4) The work of successful agitators who incite riots. (5) The growing moral vacuum of American society. (6) Mobility of the population and changing value systems of the American society and economy. (7) The influence of the mass communications media, both by instant reporting of violence and the predominance given violence in entertainment programs. The list could be perhaps lengthened by a polling of any given clientele.

DEFINING VIOLENCE

The only occurrence of the term *violence* in Scripture is Matthew 11:12, "and from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men ravage it." The term is not clear from the original language. The question that has plagued the church is twofold: (1) Are the violent men mentioned in the text those who are members of the kingdom, hence the Scriptures condemn violence? (2) Does the text imply that when the message of the kingdom is preached, it attracts persecution, hence men exercise violence on the kingdom or its inhabitants? Allen of the *International Critical Commentary* feels the

passage is in the middle voice and comments thus:

In what sense could it be said that the kingdom forces its way with violence. We must translate, "the Kingdom of the heavens is violently treated," that is, in the person of its messengers and heralds. The editors had in mind the death of the Baptist and the similar ill-treatment meted out to subsequent Christian preachers. cf. 23:34-35¹

Therefore the only time the word violence occurs in Scripture seems to give precedence to the violence inflicted on the church in the coming days of persecution.

Up until now, this paper has assumed that violence is wrong. However, there is some violence that shows a valid purpose. *Christianity Today* has stated, "Although violence itself is not necessarily evil when controlled by law and exercised in the cause of righteousness, outcroppings of violence in individuals for individual ends must either be restrained or punished."²

Webster's Dictionary gives three definitions to violence: "The quality or state of being violent. Either in a physical or moral sense." This first definition has broad meaning and seems to indicate any type of infringement upon the rights of another is violence. A second definition given by Webster is, "Unjust exercise of power, profane or irreverent treatment, infringement or injury." This definition seems to imply violence is evidenced when purpose or an exercise of the will on the part of the person doing the violence is present. If the person performs an act unconsciously, no matter what the consequences, violence is not the outcome. The third definition of Webster is, "A tending to intimidate or overcome by causing apprehension or bodily injury." This type of violence is mental or verbal and does not imply the actual carrying out of the act of ravagement.

Violence shall be defined in this paper as: Violence involves a verbal or implied threat

or overt physical action upon the rights of another person, whether the intention comes from an unjust attempt to hurt or a non-intended act of injury.

Violence seems to be as basic to Christianity as John 3:16. One cannot read the Scripture without seeing violence such as the judgment on the world by the flood in the days of Noah or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah during the days of Abraham. The crucifixion of God's Son was a *violent* death. The disciples in the book of Acts preached the gospel in obedience to God that brought about violence—the stoning of Stephen, and the stoning of Paul.

Notice the results of violence in the New Testament. Persecution in the form of violence strengthened the Christian's determination to continue the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:24, 29-30). The early Christian church was united in a communal sharing of possessions as a result of violence (Acts 4:32).

After Peter and others were beaten for preaching Christ, they departed from their oppressors, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ. "To rejoice in persecution, and triumph in the midst of pain, shame, disgrace, and various threatened deaths . . ."³ Later when Paul and Silas were beaten and put in jail in Phillippi, they rejoiced and sang praises.

Ananias obeyed the Lord's command and went to minister to Saul in Damascus. The early Christians wanted to win their persecutors to salvation. After the Philippian experience and the deliverance of the earthquake, Paul and Silas were able to bring about the conversion of the jailor to Christ.

Violence in the form of persecution sent Philip to Samaria to preach the gospel. Also it motivated Paul to go from city to city thus spreading the message of Christ's resurrection through Asia into Europe. What was the attitude of the early Christians to violence? They were persecuted, put in prison, some were killed. What did the Christians do? Did they retaliate with violence against

1. Adam Clark, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. Nashville: Abington-Cokesbury Press, [n.d.], I, p. 722.

2. "The Rising Tide of Violence" editorial, *Christianity Today*, XI, No. 22, August 18, 1968, 29.

3. Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907, p. 116.

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violence? How did they handle the area of violence?

BIBLICAL FOCUS ON VIOLENCE

Christian education is an interdisciplinary field, composed of areas of theological content and communication methodology. The purpose of Christian education was expressed well in 1957 by the Commission on General Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches in Christ, "the supreme purpose of Christian Education is the bringing of individuals to awareness of and response in faith to the love of God."⁴ The commission set five aims to accomplish the above goal. The fourth aim is, "to lead persons to an increased knowledge of the Bible, inculcating obedience thereto."⁵

Since Christian education has as one of its purposes to communicate the Bible, and the Scriptures have many occurrences of violence, the question this paper attempts to answer is, what should be the biblical attitudes to be employed by Christian educators in relationship to violence? The list would be expanded when principles from sociological and psychological areas are added. However, the intent of this paper deals with a biblical focus on violence.

Should we exclude the imprecatory Psalms from our worship service? Should we not tell of God's command to "smite Amelek, and utterly destroy all that they have and spare them not"? (I Sam. 15:3). Should the story of Calvary be told in a non-violent way? How should we handle the story of Christ driving the money changers out of the temple? The following principles suggest ways violence can be handled in Christian education processes.

1. *Teaching the fact of violence in Scripture elicits appreciation for the present.* When children study of death and destruction in the American Revolution or the Civil War, most educators agree, this does not inspire them to violence. Those who died in the past are generally appreciated. Their violence was for a purpose. Lessons are

4. *The Objectives of Christian Education: A Study Document.* New York: Commission on General Christian Education, National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., p. 6.

5. *Ibid.*

shown that without the death of soldiers, we could not enjoy our present freedom.

At the very center of the Christian faith stand two symbols of violence; (1) baptism, and (2) the Lord's table. Baptism is among other things, a visual aid that reminds us of the death, burial and resurrection in Jesus Christ—a violent death. The Lord's table teaches us that his body was broken (violently) for us and his blood was spilt (violently) for us.

As we walk through our parks and museums, we see statues reminding us of soldiers who were victorious in war (violence) as well as past tokens of battle such as canons, battleships and graves—all symbols of violence. The remembrance of such violence should stir appreciation for our present society, for without a struggle the world in which we live would be different.

2. *Show that expressions of violence are sinful reflections of the sinful nature of men.* Those who are guilty of rape (social or physical) and profane violence are expressing their natural Adamic nature without inhibitions. Christian education should instruct its pupils that the Christian life is the disciplined life. Man is not to give himself over to his natural desires or impulses. Illustrations of violence (telling it as it is) should motivate pupils to a different life. "He that hath no control over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down and without walls" (Proverbs 25:28).

3. *Teach that incidences of violence may forward the cause of the evil one.* Surely the death of Stephen was planned by Satan to crush a growing church. In the same way, the stoning of Paul at Lystra was planned to thwart the growing missionary movement. Jealous King Herod resorted to infanticide to protect his throne. Satan was behind this move to prevent the entrance of the Messiah into the world. Much of the violence today can be interpreted as a move on the part of Satan to disrupt law and order. The Scriptures teach that the government is ordained by God (Romans 13:1). Satan, therefore, might apparently overthrow government by any means.

The moral nature of man apart from the transforming power of Christ is usually opposed to anything that would change his

concept of religion or interrupt his pagan practices (Acts 13:45, 19:26-28).

4. *Show violence can be used of God to accomplish a purpose.* The Christian believes that God sovereignly controls the universe. Therefore, some of the acts of violence that ravage innocent bystanders can only be said to be permitted by God. Other incidences of violence that squander human right might be interpreted as caused by God. When the apostles preached the gospel in the book of Acts, they knew that violence would erupt. The presence of violence in the world leads us to conclude that God's way is not the repression of violence. Neither is God's goal the victory of man over violence. The persecution of the Christians under Nero and the later Roman emperors reflects a passive attitude by Christians to suppress violence yet an active preaching of righteousness. The goal of "victory in violence" whereby Christians reflect the fruit of the Spirit of the moment of violence also seems to be an empty verbiage. There are many Christians who cringed before the lions or the torch. Perhaps the emphasis of "God is glorified in all things" even violence, is the teaching of Scripture.

5. *Teach violence as a part of the process of life.* The American public is horrified at the accounts of violence in this country. President Johnson inaugurated a Blue Ribbon panel to study violence. However, history seems to indicate violence has been a continual way of life, both in the U.S. and other nations. The fact that America has perhaps had a lesser degree of lawlessness than other countries may be a result of its Christian heritage. The expression of violence in America may be our society returning to "business as usual" and expressing violence as has been present in other societies.

Perhaps the lesson of Christian education is that we ought to expect violence in our society. However, this doesn't mean we approve of violence or advocate it.

6. *The exhibition of violence demands the preaching of the gospel.* In Acts 22 Paul preached to the crowd that beat him. His

testimony including the confession of how he had previously gone from one synagogue to another, beating those who had believed in Christ (Acts 22:19). If we recognize the fact of violence in our society, we ought to be motivated to preach the gospel, attempting to win the lost, and living lives that are exemplary of Jesus Christ. Times of violence are not signals to close up church and flee to the safety of our homes (or suburbs).

7. *Teach that violence usually affects the physical rather than spiritual life.* No one wants to be physically harmed and no one wants to die. But Jesus taught that the greatest fear was from spiritual sources rather than physical. "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

8. *To support the government in attempts to heal the ills of society.* The average church member has been taught that "the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1). This proof text is used to justify police action and expressions of force by those in authority. Christians are told to support the actions of government out of duty. Yet when the government applies remedial steps to cure expressions of violence, shouldn't the church exhort its people to be subject to authorities (obey orders to bus children to different public school areas, support social and welfare programs, obey open housing laws).

9. *To support efforts to emphasize individuals in a de-personalized society.* Harvey Cox speaks of the dangers of our coming urban society. People will form monological rather than dialogical relationships. People lose their identity, hence meaning, in an organized society.

Violence is a part of life both in and out of the church. The cause of Christian education deals with man's relationship to God. The effects may be an improved society that is "violence free." However, the teaching of Scriptures doesn't give latitude to make such safety from violence a primary or even secondary aim of the church.



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