Violence by David W. Gill (1995)

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1. Defining Violence

Violence might be defined as "intentional, forceful action that causes unwelcome physical injury to another human being." To this some would add actions that "compel or prevent another's action against his or her will," whether or not physical injury results. Defining violence is, in any case, a very complex task and its resolution will determine to a large extent any ethical analysis and prescription which follow.

To begin with, the Latin etymological roots of "violence" call attention more to the psychological and physical condition of the violent agent (vehemence, impetuosity, great agitation) than to his or her effects on others. However, violent dancing, wood-chopping or yodeling do not, in and of themselves, pose any particular ethical or pastoral questions because they do not inflict injury on the self or others. Nevertheless, our definition should retain some of this etymological flavor since to include all instances of compulsion or force, no matter how slow, subtle or indirect, is too broad and inclusive to be helpful. Violence is forceful.

We may set aside most of what appears to be violence in sports and games. To the extent that such falls within rules accepted by all participants (and is thus not "unwelcome" per our opening definition), and inasmuch as any injury is accidental rather than intentional, even very rough play on the rugby or football fields is not an ethical issue. Of course, illegal, "dirty" play intending to injure an opponent is as unacceptable in sports as anywhere else. More problematic is athletic competition such as boxing which, while bounded by agreed upon rules (no blows below the belt or after the round ends), intends at least temporary physical injury to the opponent (and seriously risks permanent injury).

Finally, we should note the broader issue of intentionality. It is unacceptable violence for someone to deliberately slam his automobile into mine and injure me. But if someone is drunk and drives into me, or haphazard in aircraft maintenance leading to my injury in a plane crash, I experience a "violent" injury but it is accidental and not intended. For the latter cases, the primary ethical problem is irresponsibility. The resultant experience of serious injury is tragic but unintended and, therefore, not morally equivalent to violence.

With these preliminary qualifications in mind, we may proceed to map out the problem of violence in relation to four sets of criteria.

1.1 Individual and corporate violence. Violence occurs among individuals in the familiar forms of assault, battery, murder, rape, spousal and child abuse, and so on. Self-defense, counter-attacking the assailant of a neighbor and the physical punishment or discipline of children are some of the individual cases that require more careful attention. Violence occurs on a corporate scale in gang fights, family feuds, and in institutional forms such as police forces and armies. The ethical analysis of corporate violence must include questions of how moral responsibility is shared variously among all concerned, from the "trigger finger" to the leaders, from the agents of violence to those enjoying their protection, from the inventor and manufacturer of a weapon to its user.

1.2 Overt and covert violence. Overt violence is not difficult to identify and such phenomena constitute the essence of violence. However, it is often argued that violence can be expressed in covert ways which are as coercive, manipulative, harmful and dehumanizing as their overt counterparts. Verbal attacks may hurt as much as physical abuse; seducing an alcohol-drugged date may be de facto rape; inheritance tax laws may have as violent impact on a surviving spouse as a band of outlaws stealing property. Subliminal propaganda, hypnosis, advertising, ecclesiastical shunning, market monopolies, union strikes, state laws and even the subtle grip of tradition may be violence wearing a velvet glove. Having noted these possibilities, however, it is best to concentrate primary ethical analysis on the overt forms of violence and then direct a derivative moral scrutiny toward possible covert substitutes. To collapse this distinction between overt and covert violence risks the loss of precise, focused responses to contemporary violence by casting the net so wide that almost anything can be included.

1.3 Legal and illegal violence. Forceful, violent actions upon others by police, armed forces, athletic competitors and parents are different from mob, mugger or terrorist violence in that they are explicitly permitted by the laws governing a given social body. Violence that exceeds the limits permitted by law is then called brutality or abuse. The same action that is carried out by a legally recognized authority and is designated "force" may be rejected as "violence" or "terrorism" when performed by those without legally recognized rights to do so. Difficulties arise when one group's law allows what another group rejects. The revolt of Britain's American colonies, the current Northern Irish revolt against the English, the American invasion of Grenada and Panama, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Basque revolt against Spain and countless other examples raise issues of law and violence.

1.4 Just and unjust, moral and immoral violence. Ultimately, the law cannot decide all issues of appropriate violence or force. Nazi Germany is only the best known of many examples of societies in which terrible violence was entirely legal and yet unjust and immoral. The higher and more profound criteria in our evaluation of violence are those of ethics: the criteria of justice, rightness and goodness. Our laws (and, more broadly, our customs and traditions) concerning violence need continual revision so that they may approximate ever more closely standards of justice and goodness. While a tempting strategy, it is finally misleading to restrict the term "violence" to unethical or illegal force (and use "force" for what we aprove). A police "SWAT" team is employing violence in clearing a building of terrorists (why call it "force"?); whether it is right or not is a separate question, not to be decided in advance through labeling.

For Christians, the good, the right and the just (for questions of violence as all else) are to be found in the character and will of God, who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and Scripture. The Word of God is given to the People of God assisted by the indwelling Spirit of God in the ethical tasks of discernment and implementation. Christian ethics seeks a clear understanding of and faithful obedience to the Word of God regarding violence in our time and place. The constancy and reliability of God's character, on the one hand, and the obvious historical and cultural variety throughout biblical and ecclesiastical history (regarding violence and the people of God), on the other, must inform our ethical study. Having carried out a Christian ethical research, our task becomes that of faithfully making our presence felt in the broader multi-cultural consensus governing our society.

2. The Origin and Character of Violence.

How are we to account for violence in human experience? Arguments can be made that violence is a necessary and perhaps even a beneficial attribute of human life. The glorification of violence in the form of personal prowess (the hunter and warrior) and military conquest appears virtually everywhere in human history and mythology. This is because of the social and economic benefits of victory as well as the alleged value of such character traits as courage and bravery cultivated in violent conflict. Darwin's theory of evolution seemed to provide a scientific basis for understanding violence as an entirely natural, beneficial, progressive competition in which the fittest survive and the weak are eliminated. Humans are violent because of both genetic endowment and their learned behavior.

Of course, those injured by the violence of others have left their own sad lament across time and space. Many would argue that at this stage in our evolution, humanity should rise above violent, predatory struggle (necessary as it was in earlier eras) to a benevolent, rational, nonviolent planning and cooperation. Others argue that some final stage of revolutionary violence might be yet necessary to overthrow the last vestiges of oppression before a more just and peaceful era of cooperation can emerge. In any case, violence appears to be a normal and necessary condition of human existence with both beneficial and tragic consequences.

3. Violence in Scripture

In contrast to such views, the Bible portrays violence as fundamentally abnormal and pathological. Neither the original creation of Genesis 1-2 nor the eventual new creation of Revelation 21-22 has any place for violence. Violence results from and manifests sin, the revolt against the Creator. Thus, the fall into sin (Gen 3) leads directly to Adam and Eve's mutual alienation and to Cain's murder of Abel (Gen 4). Murder is followed by kidnapping, rape, warfare and even the institutional state violence of slavery and economic cooption (supervised by Joseph) in Genesis alone. Violence is a sin and the result of sin. It is

identified and condemned as such in many different forms and settings throughout the Old and New Testaments. Separated from the authority and guidance of God, human desires become distorted and selfish and aggressive energy can misdirected into violent attacks on others. Violence is, thus, common in a sinful world but abnormal relative to God's original and ultimate character and purposes.

There are five main lines of response to violence in the Bible. First, certain acts of violence are *prohibited* by law (e.g., "You shall not murder"). Second, violence is *contained* by law (e.g., the *lex talionis,* [only] "an eye for an eye") and political-social organization (e.g., a legal and penal system) . Third, violence is met with *counter-force* (e.g., Israel is commanded to fight against the Philistines; the apocalyptic armies of God smash the armies of the Antichrist and Beast at Armageddon). Fourth, violence is *replaced* by creative, non-violent alternatives (e.g., Gideon's candles, clay pots and trumpets; Jesus' teaching on negotiation and reconciliation). Fifth, violence is *absorbed* with patient suffering and forgiving love (e.g., "turn the other cheek," Jesus' death on the cross).

The Bible reveals a historical progression in its word on violence as other matters. The fact that violence is not part of God's creation and not part of the New Jerusalem is of considerable importance. Violence is a result of the chaos, alienation and pride of the fall. It fundamentally the work of the Evil One. To the extent that the Bible countenances the people of God participating in violence, it appears to be limited in the Old Testament by the particular circumstances of Israel in its geographic and national vocation as God's chosen witness in the ancient world. God chose to enter an epoch filled with tribal warfare and violence; Israel, God's chosen vehicle for this historical presence participates in warfare, kingship, polygamy and other phenomena that are not representative of God's original or final purposes for humankind. In comparison to contemporary practice, such participation is limited, qualified, even elevated and improved by the God of Israel. But it remains a difficult sight, understandable only in light of God's loving refusal to abandon fallen humanity sunk far below the Creator's intentions.

In the New Testament, the people of God are diffused as aliens, pilgrims and ambassadors among the nations of the world. Their primary citizenship is in the coming kingdom of God in which swords will at last be beaten into plowshares. With the teaching and example of Jesus Christ fully exhibiting God's will in a violent world, the New Testament call to peacemaking, patient suffering even for unjust cause, non-retaliation, and a general strategy of overcoming evil with good dominates the text. Christian "warfare" is carried out by means of spiritual "weapons" such as faith, prayer and the gospel. Secondary motifs in the New Testament remind us that some of the people of God may find themselves in military or police posts (e.g., Cornelius), that God intends to use those who bear the sword to punish evil and protect the good (e.g., Rom 13), and that a violent end awaits Satan and his cohorts at the end of our history (Rev 19). One of the challenges of the New Testament is that its counsel to non-retaliation is addressed to the reader and does not clearly direct the reader's response to violence against third parties, especially the weak.

4. The Christian Tradition.

Historically, our Christian forebears have interpreted the call of God and the teaching of Scripture in several different ways which might be summarized as follows. At one extreme is the Christian "crusade." From Constantine to the Crusades and on into our century, inspired by Israel's wars of conquest in the promised land (and perhaps as well by a highly literal anticipation of the conflict of Armageddon), some Christians would take up arms in a pro-active attempt to conquer in the name of Christ. On a smaller scale, individuals and groups may still share this aggressive willingness to employ violence in the name of Christ (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan).

At the other extreme, various Amish and Mennonite groups are the best known proponents of complete non-resistance to violence and evil. On this view, since the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus, Christians are called to be "in the world" but radically "not of" the world. This implies a total refusal to use the weapons of violence, even if suffering and death result. A third tradition might be summarized as "pacifism" or "non-violent resistance" as exemplified in some Mennonite groups, Quakers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Catholic Worker Movement. In common with the "non-resistance" tradition, the pacifists reject all recourse to violence against human beings. But in contrast to the non-resistance tradition, pacifists would find alternate ways to actively make

peace and stop violence. This might include public demonstrations, strikes and work stoppages, and destruction of property.

Finally, the dominant tradition in Christian history is that of the "just use" of force or violence. Provided it is limited in scope and duration, precisely targeted at the enemy and will not harm the innocent, and is undertaken for a principled, just cause, Christians may use violent means. Thus, police force to maintain law and order, armed force to protect national boundaries and populations, and personal self-defense against an attacker would all be possible. In some versions of this tradition (typically the Reformed rather than Lutheran approach), violence may be justified even in a revolt against the government if the latter is clearly not fulfilling the norms of Romans 13 as a promoter of good and punisher of evil. In any case, the non-violence of the New Testament is understood to apply to personal relations, the realm of the church, or perhaps to stand as the ultimate ethical judging our provisional, relative efforts.

5. A Christian Ethic of Violence.

Neither the "crusade" or the "non-resistance" ("quietist") extremes will be persuasive to most Christians today. In our violent world, the most compelling general stance from both biblical and practical standpoints will be that of active peacemaking and a commitment to nonviolent ways of resisting violence and evil. Violence tends to beget more violence; there has not appeared any war to end all wars. Christians should follow their Lord in bearing the cross and trying to break the cycle of violence. More than passive suffering, Christians will search for creative and redemptive ways of mitigating conditions (social, economic, psychological, religious) which provoke or encourage anger, pride, envy and violence. They may help the potentially violent to discover non-violent ways of expression. They can often defuse rage with a caring, empathetic listening ear.

Christians can protect and honor life with their actions as well as their words. This will no doubt require a "No" to epidemic abortion-on-demand, the abuse of the young, the weak and the aged, gang violence, police brutality and all other forms of excessive force in our world, as well as to the popular media which glorify violence. Saying "no" may need to be accompanied by demonstrations, strikes, political campaigns and legislative reform efforts. Still more important is the Christian "Yes" expressed in words celebrating the goodness of life, health and peace and in actions which create safe places for the threatened and healing places for both the victim and the violent.

While an aggressive, creative peacemaking is the basic Christian stance toward violence in all of its forms today, it cannot be denied that Christians may find themselves drawn into the web of violence in ways which appear not to allow a nonviolent response. This is particularly true when we find ourselves the observers of violence against the weak. While it is laudable to decide for yourself to suffer without retaliation, it is not so obviously laudable to watch the strong beat up the weak without intervening, whether on a small interpersonal level or a broader social level (e.g., Iraq invading Kuwait, Neo-Nazis attacking minorities). Even in the New Testament the evidence suggests that God is present and active amid the violence and failure of society at large, and not just within the church.

The crucial requirements for Christian participation in violence (be it as a member of the police or armed forces, or in subduing a mugger, or in revolting against an illegitimate regime) are: (1) a thorough search for peaceful, nonviolent alternatives; (2) a prayerful quest for guidance from God; (3) a conscientious reflection and decision in a group of Christians (both moral discernment and authority are promised to the Christian koinonia not the autonomous individual); (4) a careful attempt to use limited, proportionate means and only because of a just cause; and (5) a vigilant effort not to justify violence or force as "Christian" (even though one prays that God is guiding we should not claim divine approval and thus undermine the Christian witness in the world).

Specific cases of violence are legion. Consider (a) a woman with an unwanted pregnancy as a result of being raped, (b) the democratic revolutionary underground in an authoritarian, oppressive nation, (c) a policeman confronted with a gun-waving drunk in a busy shopping mall, and (d) an elderly man being kept alive in constant pain on artificial life support machines. In each case the appeal of some form of violence (against the fetus, the dictators, the gunman, the self) is strong. There are no easy answers but if Christians carry out their search for the will of God in the context of Scripture, prayer and community, if they make a wholehearted effort to find a nonviolent, peaceful response, if they resort to violent means

only under the strictly limited conditions described above, their likelihood of sowing peace in a violent world will be greatly increased.

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