

GOD'S ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE

Romans 12:18

"If possible, so far as it depends upon you, be at peace with all men."

Introduction

There have been 173 violent deaths in U.S. schools between 1994 and 1998. 31% of children ages 12-17 interviewed know someone their age who carries a gun. (May 3, 1999 TIME Magazine) In the past 18 months, 31 people have died and over 50 people wounded by gunfire from students at public schools.

The solutions suggested by the world have included stiffer penalties, gun control laws, litigation against the manufacturers of guns, video games and movies that portray violence, and the harassment of the National Rifle Association.

In the wake of national calamities, such as the school shootings, people are heard crying out for God to do something to stop the violence. I wonder what it is people want God to do beyond what He has already done.

God's answer to the problem of violence is not legislation, not education, not incarceration, not litigation. No, neither society nor culture holds the answer to this terrible blight. We must look outside ourselves for the answer to this problem of violence. God's answer to the problem of violence is the church, comprised of those whose hearts have been regenerated by the powerful Holy Spirit.

Gerry Spence says we do not need to disarm America, but to disarm hearts. While society and the culture try to remedy this problem by addressing the *outside* of man to change the *conduct*, the church is intent upon reaching *inside* to change the *heart*.

In the twelfth chapter of Romans, the Holy Spirit uses the pen of the apostle Paul to instruct Christians how a person should live whose mind has been transformed and renewed. This passage, coupled with the letter to the Ephesians, which is about the glorious church, and Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount provides for us God's answer to the problem of violence.

I. ACCEPTANCE

Much has been made over the pattern investigators have detected that the violence in our schools has come from the hands of those whom they describe as "outcasts" or "misfits." Some would pass this off as a natural characteristic of teenagers. "It's almost the definition of a teenager to be cruel to those who are not like you," said Alejandra Marsh, a 16 year old student at Columbine High School (May 3, 1999 TIME Magazine).

However normal it may be for children to be cruel to one another, the church is designed to be a place to belong. It is to be a family that cares for each individual member. Paul instructs us to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). We are to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2) and to put others before self (Phil. 2:3, 4), doing nothing from selfish ambition.

We must teach our children to respect others and their property; to be kind to others, to be a friend to the friendless, to reach out to the unreachable, and touch the untouchables; to make special efforts to include the outcasts, the social lepers of our society. Let's determine to make our congregation a welcome place for people like the woman whom Jesus met at the well outside Sychar (Jn. 4). The church is God's answer to violence in that it is a place where everyone is accepted. Jesus' love is expressed in that He accepts us as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way. The church is comprised of former outcasts who have been accepted in the Beloved and have been washed and cleansed by His blood.

*"In the Beloved" accepted am I, Risen, ascended, and seated on high;
Saved from all sin thro' His infinite grace, with the redeemed ones accorded a place.*

"In the Beloved" how safe my retreat, in the Beloved accounted complete;

"Who can condemn me?" In Him I am free, Savior and Keeper forever is He.

*"In the Beloved" I went to the tree. There, in His Person, by faith I may see infinite wrath rolling over His head,
Infinite grace, for He died in my stead.*

"In the Beloved," God's marvelous grace calls me to dwell in this wonderful place; God sees my Savior and then He sees me "In the Beloved," accepted and free.

II. ACCOUNTABILITY

The church is also God's answer to violence in that it provides a point of accountability for our behavior and attitudes. God ordained that children be held accountable for their actions by their parents. Christian parents are responsible for molding and monitoring the conduct of their children. While the producers of violent video games and movies must share some responsibility for the violence that our children are acting out, the ultimate responsibility still resides in parents. What children are allowed to see must be actively regulated by parents. According to the May 3, 1999 issue of TIME Magazine, The number of minutes spent in the evening news covering homicides in 1996 is up 721% from that in 1993. By the time a child completes elementary school, he has seen 8,000 murders in all media.

Who hasn't shared Amy Dickinson's incredulity that the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre prepared their arsenal under the noses of their parents, who claim they were not aware of the problem. Dickinson writes, *"...Is it possible for parents to miss homicidal rage? I can't help asking: Where were the [parents] when their sons were watching Natural Born Killers over and over? Have the parents seen that movie? Have they ever played Doom and the other blood-soaked computer games that occupied their children? Did these 'educated professionals' take a look at the hate-filled website their kids created? Were [they] aware of the pipe-bomb factory that was in their two-car garage? The kid down the street was aware of it, and he's 10 years old. So I wonder: Where ...were the parents? And then, like most parents I know, I wonder: Where are the rest of us? Are we vigilant enough?"*

According to TIME Magazine, the typical adolescent is alone 3.5 hours a day. Children spend 11 fewer hours a week with parents compared to the 1960s. Amy Dickinson offers this bit of advice:

"Most teenagers exist in a state of near constant mortification at the prospect of supervision by their parents. But surely a parent can risk his child's embarrassment, and his own discomfort, to get in his or her face a little bit. Surely we can manage to love them a little louder. To find the time to read their school papers, listen to their music, watch what they watch and get to know their friends." She even suggests that we parents read the lyric sheets to the music our kids play and be willing to challenge our children to give an account for objectionable content.

Beyond the accountability God provides in the home is also the accountability of Biblical authority. Many people relate the violent conduct among our children to the absence of moral training in our educational system. If I remember correctly, Bill Bennett was conversing with a member of the ACLU who bemoaned the misconduct of children in schools. Bennett suggested that signs be posted around the school which state, "Do not steal," "Do not lie," etc. The ACLU representative caught Mr. Bennett's point that a reason why we have violence among our children is that we have removed the ten commandments from the walls of public places, including schools. Children need clear and authoritative prohibitions to serve as fences to keep them in a safe environment.

Another element of God's answer to violence is contained in the Biblical teaching regarding capital punishment (Gen. 9:6, et al). Capital punishment is without any doubt a deterrent to violence. The answer to violence is incomplete without this provision of God's law.

III. A SHELTER / HAVEN

Each of us has mental images of students running for their lives from the Columbine High School building. Until SWAT teams could secure the interior of the building, many students were holed up in closets, classrooms and the kitchen.

The church is God's answer for people who are seeking shelter and a haven from the dangers that lurk in the darkness of sin. Jesus words, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28) represent an inviting call to a secure place of rest and tranquillity.

IV. FORGIVENESS

Hatred, bitterness and anger have fueled much of the violence in our schools. Here again, the church is God's response, for it is His family of forgiveness. Jesus admonishes His children to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and settle out of court (Matt. 5, 6, 7). Concerning the length and breadth of

forgiveness, Jesus instructs the church to forgive seventy times seven (Matt. 18:22).

In his letter to the Ephesian church (4:26), Paul teaches us how to deal with anger. He said, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Had the perpetrators of violence at Pearl, Jonesboro, Springfield, and Littleton adopted the mind of Christ, violence could have been averted. The church is to be the microcosm of heaven on earth. We who belong to Christ comprise God's answer to the problem of violence in that we are forgiven sinners who are eager to pass it along to those who misuse and abuse us.

Conclusion

For all the good humanitarian efforts may boast, nothing will eliminate the violence spawned by selfishness, anger and greed except the heart-changing power of the Holy Spirit of God. Humanitarian efforts are nothing more than a band-aid — a temporary fix — to cover the wound.

Our problem is sin, not social injustice. Our dependence must be upon God, not man. The answer is not culture, but the church. That only which will heal our society and restore our culture to its God-ordained peacefulness is the surrender of each individual to Christ, Who alone can effect true and lasting harmony.