

Divine violence?

In the New Testament, God's "violence" is a precondition of human nonviolence.

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [October 13, 1999](#) issue

Recently in these pages I made the following claim: "A God of most radical grace must be a God of wrath—not the kind of wrath that burns against evildoers until they prove worthy of being loved, but the kind that resists evildoers because they are unconditionally loved" ("Washing away, washing up," Aug. 25-Sept. 1). A reader was puzzled. Instead of affirming God's wrath, redefining it and making God's own self the primary target of it, as I did in that text, he thought I should have uncompromisingly rejected all notions of God's wrath. He wrote, "The word wrath is an action word that represents a violent action imposed on another. . . . I believe at all costs we must try to develop a picture of God that does not encompass wrath. . . . It is more fruitful for us to have a tougher understanding of love, love that confronts and opposes without resorting to violence, but which has power to persuade and change others and the world."

I disagree. I think instead that we should try to make plausible why God's wrath—not the wrath of any old deity, but the wrath of the God of Jesus Christ—is a good thing.

My reader and I may not disagree as much as it may seem from the stark contrast he has painted between God's love and God's wrath. He wants a God of love, but of the kind of love that "confronts and opposes" evildoers. And I have called God's resistance to evildoers, whom God unconditionally loves, God's wrath. My reader insists that Christians should follow the path of nonviolence, and that this path is not "a weak or soft means of handling evil" but "requires the most strength." I agree. But we disagree on one major thing—on whether we should affirm the possibility of "divine violence" and what such affirmation would mean for our own use of violence. Since his opinion predominates in the culture today, I'll take some time to challenge it.

There is no need to waste words here on showing that the God of the Bible is not, strictly speaking, a nonviolent God. Look wherever you want in the scriptures, in the Old or New Testament, in the teachings and practice of Jesus, in the epistles, or in the Book of Revelation, and you will invariably find a God who does not shy away from using violence. Given our contemporary sensibilities about God, we may be tempted to "develop" an alternative "picture of God." Before we give in to the temptation, however, we should ponder why the scriptures say that God wields the sword.

A good argument can be made that if and when God wields the sword, God does so not despite his love but because of it. After all, God's very being is love, so that whatever God does must flow out of love. Why does the divine love sometimes take such an unpleasant shape? The reason is simple. If we lived in a world in which we could expect all evildoers to be enlightened either by reason or example, we could dispense with the possibility of divine "violence"; to insist on it would be perverse and sacrilegious.

Nothing suggests, however, that we live in such a world. From all we can tell, we must acknowledge the tragic possibility that, through the practice of evil, some human beings will make themselves untouchable by the lure of God's love. When that happens, neither the evildoers themselves nor those who suffer at their hand can be freed from evil without some form of coercion. In such cases, "violence" is an inescapable dimension of God's unconditional love. Its absence would signal indifference to suffering, not love. If God refused to execute judgment he would lock people up in eternal nonredemption and, since his being is love, thereby deny himself. Karl Barth was right to insist that "if God does not meet us in his jealous zeal and wrath . . . then he does not meet us at all, and in spite of all our asseverations about divine love, man in actual fact is left to himself."

In insisting on the possibility of God's "violence," do we give sanction to human violence? My reader seems to share this view. "I do not believe that it is God's will for us to be wrathful or violent in our attempting to follow the will of God." He is both right and wrong. It is never God's will for human beings to use violent means to achieve their good ends. But it is incorrect to assume that it is God's will for human beings to do everything God does. Of course, we are called to imitate God—but within constraints of the recognition that we are manifestly not God! Hence we should not be surprised that there are things that only God may do. One of them is to use violence. We are neither good enough nor smart enough to do so

appropriately.

The relationship between divine "violence" and human violence is not that of analogy but that of disjunction. Far from sanctioning human violence, the New Testament shows that God's "violence" is a precondition of human nonviolence. Consider Romans 12:19-21, which is in many ways typical: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them . . .' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Here nonviolence is clearly mandated, and the use of violence is unmistakably pronounced evil. And yet the way to practice nonviolence and eschew doing evil is precisely to "leave room for the wrath of God"—the wrath of the God who unconditionally loves all human beings and who has done everything possible for his wrath not to fall on evildoers who in every way deserve it.