

Choosing life, choosing death

From the Editors in the [May 12, 1999](#) issue

The brutal shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, prompted the by now familiar search for explanations and remedies. Among the proposals: stricter gun controls; tighter regulation of content on the Internet; curbs on macabre video games like "Doom" and violent films like *Natural Born Killers*, which were favorites of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold; more vigilance by police and school officials in recognizing adolescents' signals of distress; deeper involvement by parents in their children's lives; and a greater effort to eliminate the sometimes vicious social divisions that make adolescence so painful for kids who feel left out.

Each of those proposals makes sense. The 15 deaths in Littleton--and the 13 children killed each day by firearms in the U.S.--demand action on all these fronts. Yet if what we seek is some kind of policy "solution" to the problem of school violence, it must be said that none of these proposals nor all of them put together offer a persuasive response to the shootings. It can always be pointed out that there are millions of kids with fewer advantages and resources than Eric and Dylan, dwelling in the same violent culture and with the same easy access to guns, who do not turn into killers.

In fact, many kids turn out to be courageous and caring. Some of the stories coming out of Columbine High were deeply inspiring: about students holding doors to help others flee the building, about a student who shielded his friends with his body, and about another who grabbed a grenade to toss it away from his classmates. There are stories about the roomful of students who did all they could to save the life of teacher Dave Sanders--who had saved others--and comforted him in his dying moments.

And there is Cassie Bernall, born-again Christian, who was sitting at a library table when the shooters came in. "Do you believe in God?" one of the killers asked her. "Yes, I do believe in God," Bernall said. And with that he pulled the trigger.

Some have called her a martyr for the faith. In the rush to characterize her as a martyr, some embroidering of the facts will probably take place. But we would not want to quibble. Her response was an astonishing, powerful witness. She must have

known, in that moment, that there was a safer answer to give, but she chose not to give it. No one would have blamed her for evading the question; after all, she didn't owe Eric and Dylan a serious answer. But she gave her witness to the hope that was in her. And in the light of her affirmation, the assailants' actions appear all the more clearly as demonic acts of violence, acts by people who saw nothing worth living for, only things worth destroying.

The events at Littleton have revealed inexplicable evil and grace-filled faith. Though the Spirit's ways are beyond our knowing, God has used deeds far less commanding than Cassie Bernall's to further God's purposes.