

# The crisis of violence: What can be done?

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Each day's newspaper seems to carry yet another story about a shooting by or of children, whether by accident or intention, on the street or at school, from gang violence or by a lone gunman. We understand some of the reasons behind these events: the pervasive and extreme violence which is constantly portrayed in the mass media, and the easy availability of weapons. We also know that in almost all of the recent school shootings, the family of the perpetrator either tacitly condoned or actively supported the child's use of firearms.

But even after repeated shootings of children in schools and countless slayings on the streets, no organized nationwide outcry or mass political movement has arisen to confront the violence which is devouring the minds and bodies of our children. Why not? The great majority of people in this country are concerned and responsible adults who want a safe environment for themselves and for children. Parents are horrified at the thought that their son or daughter might be murdered at school or simply while walking on the street. So why have citizens not risen up by the thousands to demand that we change the situation at all costs?

Perhaps the reason for the paralysis is that people lack a clear example of how to address such a problem. Since the 1960s, the political and social landscape has been dominated by the never-ending quest for greater and greater legal rights. This has been accompanied by the steady removal of legal restraints and controls on business in the name of economic productivity.

Because of the right to bear arms, it is possible for anyone old enough to walk to have access to destructive weapons, either by direct ownership or through ownership by someone else in the home. In the name of First Amendment rights, detailed instructions on bomb making are available on the Internet. And constraints

on the television and film industry have been removed so that almost anything can be portrayed on the screen. The appeal of aggression and violence to children's imaginations has been exploited by the business community to sell movie tickets and other products, and their right to do business without restraint is now unquestioned.

The monster of violence has been released. We have the ability to put the monster back in its cage (or at least to try), but to do so we will have to do something that is considered unthinkable in our political climate. In order to institute stricter gun control and closer supervision of the media, we will have to give up some of the freedom which has been gained over the past 40 years.

It is not surprising, then, that responsible people hesitate to take action, even against such a monstrous problem. When people feel that they have no option, and when very powerful forces are eager to maintain the status quo, only the most extraordinary individual has the strength and vision to move ahead.

We need to remind ourselves of several good examples of political action that are available. One is from international relations. In the 1970s it became clear that the governments of the world possessed enough nuclear weapons to destroy the whole planet. Atomic energy had originally been hailed as a force that could be put to peaceful use and provide energy to carry us to new heights of constructive technology. But the destructive uses of atomic energy had become so threatening that it was necessary to bring it under control, even if that meant sacrificing some of its constructive potential, depriving the weapons manufacturers of lucrative contracts, and taking some risks with our defense system. The goal of arms limitation has not yet been achieved, but the process has met with some success, and it is still going on.

A second example is from the field of public health. Before the advent of effective antibiotics, outbreaks of potentially fatal infectious disease periodically threatened communities. During these epidemics the local government, through its health department, had the authority to impose quarantine and other restrictions which deprived people temporarily of some of their individual freedom.

Arms control and public health measures are governmental interventions which are essential. Domestic gun control is now needed, and in the name of public health the media's exploitation of violent themes should be curbed.

But Christians need not wait for the public discussion on these issues to be resolved before taking action. A biblical model for action comes from Leviticus 19:14, which teaches us that we should not “curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind.” Jews and Christians have for centuries interpreted the second part of that verse to mean that one should never deliberately put a temptation in front of another person who is unable to resist it. The whole community has the responsibility of helping its weaker members to stay on the right path. If one parks a car in an unprotected area, one should not leave valuable items in view on the back seat. This is not only for protection of property, but also because no one should undermine the self-control of another person who would be tempted to break in. The point of the teaching is to protect others from their own weakness.

Even more germane to our day is Paul’s resolution of the question raised by new Christians in the city of Corinth: Is it permitted to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols? This meat was apparently available in the marketplace, and may have been less expensive than meat which had not been used in pagan rituals. The question was important because at that time there were many Christian Jews who were used to living under the Mosaic law prohibiting the eating of such food. Other new Christians had previously worshiped the very idols to whom the meat was sacrificed. Both groups of converts might be offended if this meat were served in the common meal which was the centerpiece of Christian worship. Since table fellowship was so important the leaders were anxious to remove anything which might obstruct it.

Though Paul notes that there is no prohibition against eating the meat, since “an idol is nothing at all and there is no God but one,” he goes on to say that this freedom must not be used as a stumbling block to those new Christians who still have a “weak conscience” and are unable fully to detach themselves from the Jewish law or from their previous pagan beliefs. If these brothers or sisters were to see other Christians eating the meat, they might feel compelled to join in, thus going against their conscience. Paul sees this violation of conscience as a kind of “destruction.” “So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.”

Paul concludes: “When you sin against your brother in this way and wound his weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.”

Paul’s answer is a model for action. An epidemic of violence is under way, and we must protect those who cannot maintain the boundary between thoughts and

behavior or distinguish between good and evil. We also must protect those who would become victims of violence. The welfare of our citizenry is more important than our personal freedom to own all manner of firearms or the freedom of the business community to make unlimited profit. Christians should be prepared to sacrifice as much of that freedom as is necessary to prevent the destruction of others for whom Christ died.

Christians can begin by taking aggressive action on the local level to staunch the flow of weapons to those who cannot handle them and to limit their children's exposure to violence in the media and to offensive advertising. This should be done on the Pauline principle that we must restrict our own freedom for the sake of others. Members may disagree on what constitutes harmful influences on children, but if all agree on this principle, discussion will be constructive and not divisive.

Fathers could think about taking their sons fishing instead of hunting. Parents could covenant to limit their children's access to weapons, violent films and music and TV programs, and violence on the Internet. At the same time, these issues could be discussed openly in youth groups, with adults and children talking together. This will motivate the young people to think about the effect of violence on themselves so that they can support each other and accept adult guidance.

Perhaps the most powerful thing that can be done is for law-abiding gun owners within the congregation to turn in their weapons to the local police, or at least those weapons which are not essential to the owners' immediate safety. Congregations could approach the police and open conversations about setting up gun collection points. The police could act as temporary guardians of the weapons until a more long-term solution is worked out.

This action by itself will not solve the problem, but it will lift up the power of Christ to unify the members of his body who now sacrifice for one another as he did for them. This powerful symbol will send a message to the community at large that the best protection lies not in weapons but in sacrificing together for one another's welfare.