

VIOLENCE

Why It Happens

CONTENTS

Violence On The Rise	2
Why Violence Happens	4
The Violent Results Of A Lost Relationship	12
The Predictable Progression Of Violence	17
The Future Of Violence And The Mystery Of Lawlessness.	21
Hope In A Violent World	28

Violence isn't new. No one can deny the blood-sport of the Roman Coliseum or the inhumanity of ancient war lords. It's difficult to understand, however, why war, terrorism, and domestic abuse are continuing to plague our "enlightened" world. Wasn't education supposed to bring an end to our inhumanity to one another? Wasn't the nightly news coverage of the Vietnam War supposed to shock us to our senses?

Then why are shootings, and knifings, and beatings still happening? And why does the Bible treat violence as something that only God can ultimately root out of the human heart and experience? In the following pages, RBC staff writer Dan Vander Lugt helps us to see why violence is on the rise, and what it will take for us to keep hope alive. *Martin R. De Haan II*

Managing Editor: David Sper

Cover Photo: Terry Bidgood

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Printed in USA

VIOLENCE ON THE RISE

In the 1980s and 1990s, news reports of personal and community violence became almost routine. It was common to hear about a local post office or factory where a disgruntled employee murdered co-workers, or a distraught lover who killed his estranged girlfriend and then ended his own life, or gang members killing other gang members in drug-related incidents around the country.

But there was something about the Columbine High School massacre on April 20, 1999, that shocked us to the core. The killings of Columbine didn't fit the normal pattern of teen murder and suicide. It seemed motivated by something deeper and

more sinister. In fact, it reflected changes that have been developing for decades within American society. These teen murderers seemed to express a growing capacity for violence that had been steadily gathering strength, feeding on the dark currents of Western civilization like a tropical storm feeds on the hot humid air rising from the open sea.

It was ironic that such a grim and tragic event occurred in the last year of the last century of the second millennium after Christ. It was also ironic that these violent acts happened in the pleasant suburbs of the most technologically advanced, economically powerful, and culturally influential nation in the world. In our civilized culture in this "enlightened" age, shouldn't violence have been in decline?

The Peace We Hoped For. The 20th century began with great promise, as the industrialized West anticipated an age of unbounded progress. Science seemed poised to conquer unruly nature once and for all—to bring disease, hunger, and poverty to an end. In the church, the optimism of the time was reflected in the popularity of the post-millennial viewpoint—a belief that everything would continue to get better until Christ Himself returned.

The Violence We Got. But just as the “unsinkable” Titanic failed to live up to its own billing, so also those Victorian dreams were no match for the violent capacity of human nature. Not only did the 20th century fail to be the beginning of an age of boundless peace and prosperity, but it was also

marked by human violence and atrocity on a scale far greater than anything the world had seen. Zbigniew Brzezinski estimates that during the past century, 167 to 175 million lives were “deliberately extinguished by politically motivated carnage.”

The murder rate in the United States at the end of the 20th century was nearly 10 times higher than it was at the beginning. The rate of suicide and violent crime by teenagers has tripled in the last 25 years. A quarter of American households are victimized by crime each year. All forms of child abuse are on the rise: physical, sexual, and emotional. Even a drive from home to work involves the risk of violence, as incidents of serious “road rage” rose 51 percent from 1990 to 1997.

WHY VIOLENCE HAPPENS

What are some of the factors contributing to the increasing violence around us?

Loss Of Identity.

Two hundred years ago a person's identity was more closely tied to family, community, and God. More people worked their own farms, ran their own businesses, and carried on their own trades. More laborers had personal relationships with their employers. In contrast, people today are strangers without identities.

Loss Of Healthy Family Relationships.

Healthy family relationships are foundational to social stability. Yet in 1998, one in every three births in the US was out of wedlock. According to a recent British study of the relationship

between family structure and child abuse, child abuse is:

- Six times higher in a family where a divorced mother has remarried.
- Fourteen times higher for children living alone with their biological mother.
- Twenty times higher for children living alone with their biological father.
- Twenty times higher for children living with cohabiting but unmarried biological parents.
- Thirty-three times higher for children living with a biological mother who is cohabiting with a man who isn't their father.

These statistics apply to a broad cross-section of society. They don't say what will happen in all single-parent and blended families. They do, however, show trends that need to be counteracted by conscious parental care and consideration.

Research shows that

abuse is less likely to occur in healthy home environments. But the pattern is reversed when children are denied the model of a loving mom and dad. Nationally, 70 percent of young people held in state reform institutions are from one-parent or no-parent homes. The FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime concludes that "the three most frequent factors in the history of a killer are physical or sexual abuse, a failure in emotional attachment to the mother, and a failure to use parents as role models."

Trends for the future are not good. Criminologists predict a wave of "super-criminals" who are raised without positive male role models, proper guidance, or affection.

Loss Of Innocence.

Proverbs 22:6 declares, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he

is old he will not depart from it." The experiences of infancy and childhood have great influence on adult behavior. In her 1981 book *Children Without Childhood*, author Marie Winn describes how our culture has changed from nurturing children to providing them with early exposure to adult experience in the hope of preparing them for the challenges of life. This cultural shift has brought a relentless assault on children's innocence by the media. Popular musicians and movie stars model increasingly violent and promiscuous behavior before ever-younger audiences.

Research from the 1970s to the present consistently demonstrates a connection between media sex and violence and the self-destructive behavior of young people. In their book *Saving Childhood*, Michael and Diane Medved report:

A September 1997 *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 87 percent of respondents agree that “TV has more sex and violence than 10 years ago,” and 71 percent say shows depicting nudity or sex encourage immorality. A survey of 570 Hollywood elite found that even within the industry itself, half “said that TV had a negative impact on the country, and strong majorities said TV only did a fair or poor job in encouraging such things as lawful behavior, sexual abstinence, and respect for police” (p.26).

In spite of overwhelming agreement about the causal factors, we seem to lack the collective will to do anything about it. Even though the danger is self-evident, we seem too often to be guided by the lowest common moral denominator of our culture.

Loss Of Community.

The Bible emphasizes our responsibility to neighbors (Ex. 20:16-17; Mt. 22:38-39). This isn't surprising. It is in the context of relationships with neighbors—people we know well—that good character is nurtured. American culture, like other modern cultures, has taken a

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decidedly un-neighborly turn. Fewer Americans are living in the same place for more than a few years. Most move hundreds or thousands of miles from their childhood community to get employment. In fact,

few people today seem to consider established friendships a factor when given an opportunity to move to a new house in a nicer community.

Yet having roots in community is civilizing. One is less likely to steal from a neighbor if he is a friend. One is less likely to cheat a customer or a businessman if he is someone you see on a weekly basis. A husband is less likely to be an adulterer if everyone he knows will be indignant at the harm he has done to his wife and family. That's the way it used to be. Now, however, in an impersonal culture, sin is anonymous. Our loss of social moral restraints leads to antisocial attitudes and an illusion of independence from moral law.

Ironically, feelings of resentment and entitlement grow stronger as a sense of personal and community responsibility diminish. It is

easier to feel resentment and hatred in isolation. If we don't know or care about our neighbor, it is easier to covet his house, his wife, and his possessions. It is far easier to act violently toward those we don't know—and don't want to know.

Loss Of Satisfaction.

Historically, most people were too occupied with the struggle to survive to even compare themselves with the wealthy. Today food, clothing, and shelter are a birthright. Those who have less have the leisure to resent those who have more. Adding to the passion of their envy, our culture offers people the demoralizing values of crass materialism and consumerism (Prov. 27:20; Eccl. 5:10-13).

Loss Of Responsibility. Not too long ago, a driver with a gun was cut off in traffic. He began a wild chase that ended when he shot the

other driver. As he waited for the police to arrive, he asked onlookers, “Did you see what he did?”

People today often feel they aren’t responsible for what they do, that they are victims of circumstances or “irresistible impulses.” This mindset often results in violence. Job 5:2 declares, “Wrath kills a foolish man, and envy slays a simple one.”

Loss Of Authority.

Many of our universities have reinforced the cynicism and despair that are at the core of modern values. Teaching that there is no absolute truth or reliable authority, they maintain that what is important is political power.

When all spiritual and moral authority is denied, important social restraints are lost. Truth is replaced by “spin,” and “spin” is condemned only if it doesn’t work. If it continues, this

denial of objective truth will produce disunity, hatred, and violence.

Loss Of Control.

Some of us are deeply disturbed by these dangerous cultural trends. Knowing that our freedom depends on personal responsibility, we view our society’s drift with alarm. We find ourselves acting contrary to our deepest convictions, and sometimes may even respond violently. But violent reactions only lead to more violence.

These losses and others contribute to the violent spirit of the age. However, they are just symptoms of a more profound underlying problem. The most important explanation for violence is found in a loss of peace at the deepest levels of our existence.

Loss Of Relationship With God.

In the beginning, there was peace. According to the Bible, our

first parents lived in a perfect world. They were innocent, with nothing to hide (Gen. 2:25). They walked and talked with God when He appeared in the garden of Eden (3:8-9). As long as they enjoyed peace with Him, they had peace with each other and everything they needed.

In the beginning, life had the peaceful characteristics that, according to the Bible, will once again characterize the earth in the last days. The prophet Isaiah said of this future messianic kingdom: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6).

The Hebrew word for such peace is *shalom*. *Shalom* is more than the mere absence of violence—it pictures life in harmony with

God, the presence of spiritual well-being, material provision, righteousness, wholeness, and victory over evil.

But early in the earth’s history, something sinister broke the peace, something that wanted to establish its

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own authority against God, something that would soon shatter the garden’s peace. This evil spirit, later identified as Satan (Rev. 12:9; 20:2), commandeered the body of a garden animal described in the Bible as “the serpent.” Speaking

through the mouth of the serpent, the rebel spirit told our first parents that their Creator could not be trusted. He said the Creator was holding out on the couple by denying them access to the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:1-6).

Using a venomous half-truth, the serpent told them that only by eating of the forbidden tree could they become like God, knowing good and evil. He denied what God had said—that this act would kill them (Gen. 3:1-4).

When the man and woman trusted the rebel rather than God, they got what they wanted—and more. With a firsthand taste of the difference between good and evil, our first parents experienced the death of their innocence. Their thoughts would never again be the same. From then on they would

experience anxiety, anger, pride, and lust. Something within them became disconnected from God.

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Their peace with their Creator was shattered, and they were infected with the germ of violence and death.

After confronting the couple with what they had done, God turned to the serpent who had introduced them to evil and said:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel (Gen. 3:15).

History has become a commentary on this prediction. Here was a promise not only of the violent conflict of the ages to come, but also a veiled anticipation of a child of the woman who would ultimately defeat the rebel and restore peace to the world.

As the New Testament later revealed, the descendant of the woman would be the God-man, Jesus. Satan would “bruise His heel” by inflicting suffering and death. But on the cross of His own undeserved execution, Jesus would destroy Satan’s power over death (Heb. 2:14). By the wisdom of God that outmaneuvered the strategies of the enemy, Jesus used the cross to give heaven the legal right to rescue millions who had been taken hostage by the rebel. It was on the cross that Jesus took our place,

carried out our rescue, and secured a plan that will eventually lock Satan away forever at the end of the age (Rev. 20:2-10).

Although the Creator patiently offered to restore His relationship with a fallen Adam and Eve, He didn’t exempt them from the consequences of their distrust. So our first parents were exiled from Eden (Gen. 3:22-24) into a violence-prone world. Evicted from the garden, Adam and Eve immediately began experiencing the painful consequences of their bad choices. Life became a struggle (3:16-19). In the growing darkness of sin outside the garden, the first couple came face to face with the forces of the violence they had unleashed. In a fallen world of their own choosing, Adam and Eve discovered that the enemy had won a large part of their own hearts.

THE VIOLENT RESULTS OF A LOST RELATIONSHIP

By stepping out on their own, our first parents sacrificed our legacy of peace. Instead of relying on the generosity of a provider-God, the man and woman tried to look after their own interests. By stealing a bite from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they ended up with far more knowledge than they could afford. In time they discovered firsthand, and to their own regret, that evil and violence are the twin consequences of a lost relationship with God.

The Violence Of Self-Protection.

According to the Bible, healthy relationships flow from a healthy dependence on our Creator (Jn. 4:13-14; 6:32-35; 49-51). Emotional and spiritual security are

found by those who believe that “man shall not live by bread alone; but . . . by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord” (Dt. 8:3).

Only in our reliance on God can we be secure enough to care for one another out of the generous provision He makes for us. Those who lack this confidence are more inclined to believe that if they don’t look out for themselves, no one else will. Such a mindset causes self-protecting persons to try to provide for themselves at the expense of others.

The Violence Of Envy And Unrestrained Desire.

When people have no fear of God and no reliance on Him, they have no internal boundaries. Greed turns a plentiful world, which God created to provide abundance to all (Gen. 1:26-30), into a battleground (Jas. 4:1-2). Alienated from God,

self-reliant people become like hungry animals competing for prey.

Sometimes envy comes in ways that seem justified. The book of Psalms speaks of a man named Asaph. He was overcome by his envy of the godless who seemed to prosper far more than the people who trust their God. Admitting that he was so envious that he almost lost his faith, Asaph said, “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before You” (Ps. 73:21-22 NIV).

The internal unrest and agony of heart that Asaph experienced was used by God to eventually bring him to an eternal perspective that restored his sense of grace and gratitude. First, however, Asaph experienced the anger created by the vacuum of his own unfulfilled desires. He discovered that even people of faith can become

dangerous when they are envious of their neighbors.

The Violence Of Seeking A Scapegoat.

Without the peace (*shalom*) and purposefulness that flow from a relationship with God, people are fearful and

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angry. The uncertainty and meaninglessness of their lives fill them with anxiety. Their futile search for satisfaction fills them with frustration and rage. The pressure of these bad emotions keeps growing inside.

Since it is hard to live with bottled-up emotions, such persons often look for someone else to blame,

someone to be the lightning rod for their accumulated rage and fear. Separated from God and unwilling to take responsibility for their own bad feelings, people are seething beneath a surface of forced civility and seeking a scapegoat to blame.

The characteristics of society and culture are in part the sum of fallen individuals living together in recurring moments of despair. Reflecting the frustrations and anxieties of the individuals who form them, societies and their institutions struggle with boundless desire (lust), anger, and fear.

Governments exist to restrain these tendencies and to assure a social order that can resist anarchy and uncontrolled violence (Rom. 13:3-5). But without a foundation in truth—which requires relationship to God—all social systems are destined to develop their

own lies and threats to try to hold the masses in check.

Cultures create religions and ideologies in their own likeness (Rom. 1:21-23). These false religions repeat the mistakes of the individuals who have devised them. As organized systems of belief, they too look for someone to blame for the frustration, fear, and anger that everyone feels.

In ancient times, the scapegoat might have been a virgin girl or young man specially chosen for sacrifice—someone slain before the eyes of the people to “appease the gods.” In modern times, when mankind no longer looks to the gods for security, the scapegoat could be an unpopular race, a despised minority, or an enemy nation. Now, as in the past, the scapegoat gets the blame for society’s fears and problems.

The practice of blaming

others for our own sins began with Adam and Eve and continued with their son Cain. Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, and Cain blamed Abel. Once a right relationship with God is broken, people become obsessed with trying to protect their own “self-righteousness” in an effort to avoid the pain and shame of their own guilt and accountability to God. Men and women try to find someone else to blame for their own evil choices. And to the extent that people act out this self-deception, they are all as dangerous as Cain, who killed his brother. Even if they aren’t physically violent, they can abuse others with words of hatred or glances of contempt.

Having lived under one of history’s most violent regimes, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn remarked, “Let us not forget that violence does not have its own

separate existence and is, in fact, incapable of having it. It is invariably interwoven with the lie. They [violence and the lie] have the closest of kinship, the most profound

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natural tie. Violence has nothing with which to cover itself except the lie, and the lie has nothing to stand on other than violence” (from his Nobel lecture, 1970).

Because truth is the

victim, when people deny their own culpability, the prophets and ministers of truth are often the ones who suffer violence.

Jesus told His enemies:
I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth (Mt. 23:34-35).

It is at this point that the truth brings us to a dangerous crossroads. The human obsession with a scapegoat might lead us to believe that this natural fallen tendency would explain the death of Christ. Many believe that Christ is the ultimate example of our attempt to pawn off our guilt on someone else.

Christ, however, is the only legitimate “scapegoat” who can break the cycle of

violence. He is the only scapegoat who was not chosen by men but by God. With unsurpassable irony, it was the Son of God who voluntarily bore the undeserved condemnation of our anger and sin. It was God’s own Messiah who intervened in our behalf to bear sin that could never be borne by the scapegoats of our own choosing.

By fulfilling prophecy, by living a perfect life, by performing miracles, by revealing extraordinary wisdom, by dying an undeserved death, by rising from the dead, and by ascending to heaven, Jesus proved He was the one Scapegoat and Savior chosen by God Himself.

Because our purpose in this booklet is to consider why violence happens, let’s go back to the beginning of man’s history and trace the predictable stages and progression of violence.

THE PREDICTABLE PROGRESSION OF VIOLENCE

Violence Begins In A Rebellious Heart.

The first human bloodshed was fratricide. Cain, the first son of Adam and Eve, killed his younger brother because of envy and his prior dispute with God (Gen. 4:5-8). The apostle John wrote:

This is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous (1 Jn. 3:11-13).

From the beginning of time it has been the same. When people don't have a right relationship with God, they envy and resent the spiritual legitimacy of those

who continue to seek Him.

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Individual Violence Eventually Leads To Societal Violence And Anarchy.

Cain, the first murderer, was the founder of the first city, which he named after his son Enoch (Gen. 4:17). In time, the city took on the character of its founder. Under the double curse of Adam's sin and Cain's murder, the first civilization eventually lost its civility and descended into such a state of violence that God found it necessary

to intervene. Grieved by the violence of a rebellious race, God responded in judgment. With severe mercy, He brought an end to the killing, rape, and abuse that had become the mark of a morally bankrupt society. After 100 years of warning, God used the waters of a flood to end the lives of everyone except the family of a man named Noah (Gen. 6:11-13).

The global spread of violence was temporarily checked. But the reality of the rebellion in the heart of people still existed. Given enough time, the disease of sinful individual hearts always spreads outward and infects the cities and civilizations. This is a recurring theme of the Bible—the evil in individual hearts spreading like a plague until God intervenes to check the consequent violence. He did this at the tower of Babel, in the

judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, and then eventually in the judgment of the corrupt cultures of Canaan.

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But even the “chosen people” raised up by God to replace a decadent civilization (Gen. 12:1-3) fell into moral decadence and violence. Although God intervened repeatedly, His people followed a predictable pattern. The better times that invariably followed God’s interventions eventually led to moral and

spiritual decline. Within a few decades, everyone was once again doing what was right in their own eyes (Jud. 17:6). Violence became the mark of the culture, and before long God found it necessary to let an invading army become the rod of discipline to bring His people back to their senses.

The Violence Of Anarchy Leads To The Violence Of Tyranny.

God's intention for His chosen people was to preserve them as His "special treasure" (Dt. 14:2). He wanted the social order and spiritual values of Israel to result in benefits for the whole world. Israel was not chosen by God merely for her own benefit but to point all nations to the one true Provider and Source of peace.

Again and again, God found His people reluctant to live for anything beyond their own short-sighted

interests. With the passing of moral leaders like Moses and Joshua, Israel's resolve to follow God grew weak. The Israelites took the path of their ancient ancestors, disregarding the opportunity to trust the King of heaven, who wanted them to know the joy of living in complete dependence on Him.

At a critical point in their spiritual rebellion, the people of God became fearful. Looking at their own deteriorating circumstances (1 Sam. 4:1-18), they decided they needed the kind of leadership they saw in neighbor nations. Facing disaster created by anarchy, they decided to give up their freedom in exchange for a king of flesh and blood.

The Lord told His prophet Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them.

According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day—with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also. Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them” (1 Sam. 8:7-9).

The character of a monarch is seldom better than that of his people. Power corrupts. Saul, Israel’s first king, did not begin as an especially evil man (2 Sam. 1:19-27). But as a king, his character became progressively worse (1 Sam. 13:13-14; 16:14).

In contrast to Saul, Israel’s second king, David, was “a man after God’s own heart.” Yet in spite of his outstanding qualities (1 Sam. 16:13), David too showed that he

was capable of treachery and violence (2 Sam. 11:2-27).

After David died, corruption again took the upper hand. Even though David’s son Solomon began

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his reign with enormous spiritual insight, time and personal failure found him repeating the patterns of the past. Within a few decades, the peace was once again shattered by civil war and violence.

THE FUTURE OF VIOLENCE AND THE MYSTERY OF LAWLESSNESS

The Hebrew Scriptures contain a record of the effects of Adam and Eve's rebellion—the loss of *shalom* and the introduction of violence. The New Testament gives us further insight into the ongoing and future effects of “inherited sin.” The apostle Paul referred to the forces of violence and evil that were unleashed on the world by Adam and Eve as the “mystery of lawlessness.”

The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the

brightness of His coming (2 Th. 2:7-8).

The word translated as “lawlessness” refers to a state of rebellion against God—a state opposed to righteousness and peace (Rom. 6:19; Heb. 1:9; 1 Jn. 3:4). A “mystery” in the New Testament refers to something that can't be understood by natural human reason apart from God's revelation. The “mystery of lawlessness,” therefore, refers to the invisible person and principles of “the lawless one”—he who in the beginning convinced our parents to taste evil for themselves. It is he who in the last days will take on flesh and blood, as he indwells the person of the Antichrist. This mystery of lawlessness is now revealed to us—an invisible lawless rebel, who will in the last days do battle with the King of kings.

For now, believers need to resist this rebel by living with an understanding of the following principles of lawlessness and violence.

Violence Will Continue To Be Rooted In Personal Evil. We need

to remember that the evil against which we struggle in this world is not merely outside of ourselves. Neither is it random or accidental. This evil cannot be rightly attributed only to defective systems of education, religion, community, or government. The evil seeds of violence have been and always will be found in our own personal opposition to the kingdom and rule of God. Before our conversion, according to the apostle Paul, we are at the mercy of “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1-3). Only after we are indwelt by the Spirit of God do we have

the spiritual resources to resist him (Jas. 4:7).

Violence Will Continue To Be A Parasite On The Back Of Truth. The evil that

produces violence depends on truth for its strength. Evil has no power apart from the distortion and misuse of truth.

Adam and Eve took paradise for granted. They had never been exposed to a lie. Posing as a messenger of truth, the evil spirit speaking through the serpent told them a half-truth. He told them that by rejecting God’s word they would gain knowledge and freedom (Gen. 3:4-5). They soon discovered that without a right relationship to God, freedom and knowledge became a curse. Without a relationship to the principles of God’s kingdom, freedom and knowledge become tools of self-destruction.

Paul told the Corinthian

Christians that he feared, “As the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3). He warned them that false apostles were “transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light” (vv.13-14).

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Jesus warned in the parable of the tares (Mt. 13:24-30,36-43) that evil people would so effectively disguise themselves as the children of God that they wouldn't be fully exposed

until the time of judgment. Evil always clothes itself in half-truths—in twists, convolutions, and inversions of the truth.

Jesus, the One who is truth (Jn. 14:6), gives His followers the Word of truth (17:17) and the Spirit of truth (15:26) to guide us into all truth (16:13) and to protect us from Satan's attacks (Eph. 6:13-18).

**Violence Will
Continue To Be
Rooted In The
Rejection Of Truth.**

Violence doesn't just happen. It's a symptom of rejecting the truth. Whether that truth resides in the world of nature, in the words of the prophets, or in the basic understanding of the Scriptures, the principle is the same—violence follows in the steps of evil that rejects the knowledge and rule of God.

Israel, like Adam and Eve, was given the opportunity for

a special relationship with God. But Israel ignored God's warnings about the certain results of rebellion (Dt. 29:14-20; Isa. 3:8-26). As a consequence, the "chosen people" became an example of what will eventually happen to everyone who rejects the light and rule of God.

As a result of their failures, the Jewish people repeatedly suffered from violence: invasion, captivity, and the yoke of foreign domination. Israel demonstrated to us how far we are all inclined to go in rejecting God. When God sent His own Son to them, Jewish leaders joined Roman executioners in putting Him to death (Mk. 14:53-65; 15:1-41). Because of that rejection, the gospel of God's grace—the opportunity for a restored relationship to God—was then given to the Gentiles (Acts 28:25-28).

Today, however, most

Gentiles are following the pattern of the people of Israel. And because the gospel of God's Son was revealed even more clearly to the Gentiles than to Israel (Acts 17:22-30), Gentile rebellion will have even more disastrous consequences (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:28-31). Jesus said:

That servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few (Lk. 12:47-48).

Just as the fall of Lucifer ("lightbearer"—another name for Satan) brought down hosts of lesser angels, the fall of a culture that has been given great spiritual advantages will be devastating. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I

did not come to bring peace but a sword” (Mt. 10:34).

The nations of the world have been blessed by the effects of the gospel. Millions have tasted the benefits of what it would be to experience a restored relationship with God. But just as Israel forgot that peace, wholeness, and well-being are from the Lord, the modern world’s rejection of the Prince of Peace is creating a kind of lawlessness more concentrated and dangerous than any that existed before.

Violence Will Be Incultured In A City.

For the prophets of Israel, the ancient kingdom of Babylon epitomized the evils of paganism. In the New Testament, Babylon represents an evil political, economic, and religious system that in the last days will stand in opposition to Christ and His kingdom (Rev. 17:1-7).

The name “Babylon” is derived from Babel, a city founded after the Flood in a cooperative challenge to God’s authority (Gen. 11:4). From the first city built by the murderer Cain, to Babel, to Babylon, to the great cities of the modern world, urban life has, over time, always tended to foster a false sense of power, invincibility, and independence (Dt. 8:11-17).

Today, the devil continues to tempt modern humanity with the same offer he made Jesus in the wilderness (Mt. 4:8-9). He seeks to shift our allegiance from the one true King of the universe to the organizers and powers of society. He tries to deceive us, as he did Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:30) and the Prince of Tyre (Ezek. 28:2), into thinking of ourselves as gods in control of our destinies.

The Bible teaches that all truth proceeds from God

(Dt. 8:3; 32:4; Jas. 1:17). But the gift of knowledge can also be distorted by the delusion that we, on our own, can recreate the *shalom* of Eden.

In the relatively recent past, the circumstances of daily life demanded humility and a sense of responsibility to God. In a typical parish of Shakespeare's England, for example, only 3 out of 10 newborns could be expected to survive to their 15th birthday. People were acquainted with death and dying. Even the fact that animals were raised and slaughtered at home made people more conscious of their mortality.

Today, people are insulated from the harsh facts of existence by so many layers of material comfort and technology that we forget we are God-dependent mortal creatures. We are inclined to think of ourselves as our own

providers and protectors.

The mass murderers of the past century—Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot—were ordinary people who denied that they were creatures responsible to the all-powerful King. Suppressing awareness of their own depravity and denying their need for forgiveness and a right relationship with God, they embraced ideologies that gave free rein to the evil inclinations of their hearts. Rejecting the cross of Christ, they yoked themselves to Babylon.

These leaders are but a pale foreshadowing of the violence that will come when the ultimate Antichrist sits on the throne of the last Babylon.

Violence Will Be Personified In A World Leader. Scripture declares that the mystery of lawlessness will lead to the Antichrist, also known as the Beast. The world's

rejection of Christ is creating powerful currents of spiritual evil that will eventually sweep the world into the grip of the “lawless one” (2 Th. 2:8). He will be the personification and fulfillment of the mystery of lawlessness. He will be absolute evil, hating Christ and everyone who belongs to Him (2 Th. 2:1-12; Rev. 13:1,4,7,15).

The Possible Tactics Of The Beast. The Beast will make a scapegoat of God’s people for refusing to follow him. Like the Roman emperors who came before him, he might portray Christ’s followers as antisocial. He may also label them as bigots, victimizers, and the perpetrators of hate crimes because of their unwillingness to submit to the moral changes and “tolerance” he will demand.

The Violence Of The Beast. The masses will follow him. As demonstrated

by the “Eichmann Experiments” conducted in the early 1960s at Yale University, ordinary people are shockingly willing to commit acts of violence against strangers when asked to do so by a perceived authority.

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Authority has great power over depraved people who, unrelated to God, are without mooring in truth and are offered opportunity to vent their rage on perceived “legitimate” scapegoats.

HOPE IN A VIOLENT WORLD

The Bible makes it clear that the spirit of the Antichrist is already in the world and can be seen in the world's hostility to the gospel (1 Jn. 4:1-3). So where can we find hope?

Hope Can Be Found In The Kingdom Of Christ. Christ can break the cycle of personal violence in the lives of those who surrender to Him. He helps us to see that our worth is defined by the principles of His kingdom. He has restored our relationship with God and confirmed the infinite worth of every individual by His precious blood (Rom. 5:1-2). He has released us from the law of sin and death and given us the Spirit of life (8:2).

Hebrews 12:24 tells us that Jesus is the "Mediator of the new covenant," and that His blood "speaks

better things than that of Abel." Abel's blood brought a curse on those who shed it. But Christ's blood brings redemption and mercy to lost sinners, expecting that they who have been forgiven will in turn have mercy on other offenders (Mt. 6:14; 18:21-35).

Lustful or vindictive violence has no place in the kingdom of Christ. He requires us to examine our own hearts and recognize the seeds of lawlessness there. All of us have violence in our hearts. We aren't detached spectators.

When Peter drew a sword and struck the high priest's servant, Jesus said, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt. 26:52).

The Hope Of Christ's Kingdom Is Meant To Be Shared.

Jesus Christ came as the messenger of hope to the poor, despised, and

downtrodden (Isa. 11:3-5; Lk. 4:18). John's gospel tells how a woman, caught in the act of adultery, was brought to Jesus by His enemies to set a trap for Him. They declared that the law demanded she be stoned to death. Jesus gently thwarted their violent intentions, saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first" (8:7). When her self-condemned jury had gone, He said, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." So Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (vv.10-11).

In the decade before World War II, most German Christians failed to take a stand against Hitler when he began killing the retarded, the mentally ill, the aged, and other people he considered "worthless." Rather than publicly stating their opposition to Nazi

programs, Christians implied their support by cooperating and remaining silent. Their failure to take a stand led to further horrors, including the murder of millions of Jews, Gypsies, and political dissidents. It wasn't that the church didn't take up arms against evil, but that it was unwilling to risk exposing it for what it was. A Jewish psychologist who survived internment in a Nazi concentration camp prior to the war said, "Above all, it was the silence that condemned the Jews to death."

There are times when the church as an organized body needs to speak out against evil and violence. The church's silence in the face of naked evil—as it generally was in Nazi Germany—can't be reconciled with the biblical imperative to come to the aid of the oppressed.

As recipients of the grace

of God, followers of Christ can be realistic about human nature. This gives us a unique potential as mediators. Realism about the violence in our own hearts can help us confront evil and violence without pride and self-righteousness. This spirit of meekness is essential against the spirit of antichrist, which always seeks to misrepresent Christian motives.

The fact that individual Christian citizens can have a key civic role doesn't mean they should try to set up a "Christian government." Such attempts have often resulted in religious dictatorships worse than the evils they wanted to purge. Even genuine Christians are susceptible to the corrupting influence of power. But because they have a clearer understanding of the evil resident in the human heart that fuels violence, they are better equipped to confront

it compassionately without overreacting to it and perpetuating it.

Nonetheless, the spirit of antichrist in the world assures us that followers of Christ will be misunderstood, hated, and eventually made objects of violence. Jesus told His disciples:

A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you (Jn. 15:20).

If we do the work of the kingdom, we will be misunderstood and hated—like all of God's messengers before us. But forgiveness is the only way out of the cycle of violence.

The Hope Of Christ's Kingdom Is The Remedy For Despair. A Jewish leader came to Jesus, pleading for Him to come to his home and heal his daughter who was gravely ill. The crowd delayed Jesus, and before

He could reach the man's daughter, a messenger came to say, "Your daughter is dead. Do not trouble the Teacher.' But when Jesus heard it, He answered him, saying, 'Do not be afraid; only believe, and she will be made well'" (Lk. 8:49-50). "Impossible!" the crowd thought. But the girl was brought back to life.

This violent world may seem beyond hope—but so did a lifeless little girl. The Lord didn't call us to be spectators of the world's self-destruction. He gave us the task to carry on His work of healing and redemption. We are the heirs of His kingdom. The darker the world, the more powerful and penetrating the kingdom's light. Jesus said:

You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may . . . glorify your Father in heaven (Mt. 5:14-16).

The following prayer,

attributed to St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), eloquently expresses the light that is needed in a violent world:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.

Where there is hatred,
let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so
much seek to be consoled
as to console;

To be understood as
to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving
that we receive;

It is in pardoning
that we are pardoned;

It is in dying that we are
born again to eternal life.

This is the kind of attitude that can be expressed by those who have the security of knowing that they are

loved and provided for by God. Out of the overflow of their lives they can seek the good of others.

The Hope Of Christ's Kingdom Promises A Paradise Regained.

Shortly after Christ's resurrection, the apostle Peter said that Jesus would return at the "restoration of all things," a time "which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:21). The apostle Paul spoke of the transformation of the entire world:

The creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

The prophet Isaiah described the hope of those who await the coming Messiah:

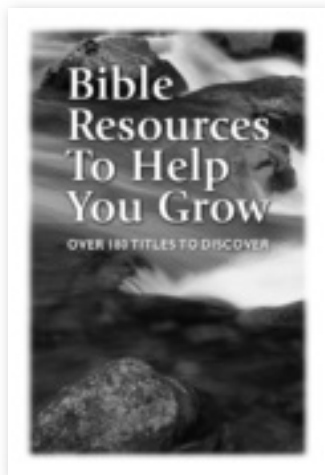
The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the

Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears; but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain (Isa. 11:2-4,6,9).

This is the Bible's answer to a violent world, a hope proclaimed by angels in the fields near Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men! (Lk. 2:14).

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