

# The Biblical Contexts of Violence and Responses

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Introduction - Violence goes on in every culture and in most relationships. Some violence is physical, some is emotional, some is spiritual. All violence hurts someone. The American Heritage Dictionary gives six definitions of violence which are related in some ways, but are focused on the element of purpose:

1. Physical force exerted for the purpose of violating, damaging, or abusing: *crimes of violence*.
2. The act or an instance of violent action or behavior.
3. Intensity or severity, as in natural phenomena; untamed force: *the violence of a tornado*.
4. Abusive or unjust exercise of power.
5. Abuse or injury to meaning, content, or intent: *do violence to a text*.
6. Vehemence of feeling or expression; fervor. (2000)

Thus violence in definitions 1, 4, 5, 6 most often has a purpose: to damage or abuse someone.

These four kinds of violence are human violence, and can happen any time, any place. Thus violence is diametrically opposed to the values of the kingdom.

For this paper I am going to focus on violence as it affects Christians, such as persecution for being Christians (Njoroge, 2005; Lyon, 2002), offense against the gospel translated into hostile actions toward Christians (Aragon, 2003), etc. Further, I will focus on the biblical data both as to the kinds of violence which occur and the response from Christians to the violence. As bishop Njoroge (2005) says, "As Christians, we are invited to dismantle the conspiracy of silence and the culture of death, and to create a culture of life." J. D. Payne identified three kinds of responses: flight, avoidance, engagement (2006). As he points out both Jesus and the church engaged the people and the cultural values of their day, even when they knew they would find

direct opposition. However, Jesus and the church never do violence to confront violence. The reason will be examined later.

Reports of violence in our day are increasing, “A new militancy among non-Christian religions in the 1990s has meant that in some parts of the world Christian efforts at conversion are being resisted with *violence*. In September, a Roman Catholic priest was killed in India for his "illegal" attempts to convert Hindus. And Muslim gangs in Java have ransacked hundreds of churches.” (Report, 1999).

Part 1 – Biblical Data            The theme of this paper is to identify in the scripture the contexts of violence when the gospel is preached and show the biblical response. There are eight forms of the English word “violence,” translated from *biazw* or *ballo*, which occur 113 times in the Bible, with 13 of these in the New Testament. There are seven forms of the English word “force” which occur 68 times in the Bible, with 11 in the New Testament. Three Greek words are used which are translated force: *pornia* (Eph. 6:12); *anagkazo* (Acts 26:11; 28:19); and *arpazein* (Matt. 11:12; John 6:15). In a more comprehensive summary, biblically the main types of violence are:

Table 1

Violence	biazw	Mt. 11:12; Acts 2:2; Rev. 18:21
Force	pornia	Eph. 6:12
Torture	tumpanizo	Heb. 11:35
Persecution	dioko	Mt. 5:10-11;44; Jn. 15:20; I Tim. 1:13; 2 Cor. 12:10
Insult	hubris	Mt. 5:11; 2 Cor. 12:10;
Speak evil	eiposin poneron	Mt 5:11;
Scourge	mastigo	Mt. 23:34;

Kill	apoktenete	Mt. 23:34
Betray	prodotes	Acts 7:52
Destroy	protheo	Gal. 1:13
Distress	anagkais	2 Cor. 12:10

The Bible gives examples of and responses to these contexts.

The examples of the biblical responses to violence are:

Table 2

Bless	eulogeite	Rom. 12:14;
Be Content	eudoko	2 Cor. 12:10;
Endure / faith	anechometha	1 Cor. 4:12; 2 Thess. 1:4
Persevere	upenegka	2 Tim. 3:11;

By looking at the context of the uses of force and violence and discerning when there are parallels to present contexts the appropriate response can be discerned. This does not offer a complete set of responses to present situations but it does present the main biblical patterns. Some of the instances of violence are done by God; most are done by humans. The context shows the difference, but the use of violence is not just against believers (Marshall, 2004), the plagues for example.

There are three types of material which can be applied to contemporary problems with violence. First, there is the example of Jesus in experiencing and confronting violence. Second, there is the example of the disciples in experiencing and confronting violence. Third, there is teaching in both the gospels and the epistles about responding to violence. Since the early experience of the Jesus and the disciples created the patterns of response this paper will focus on

these three contexts, with two of the teaching passages from the gospels and one from the epistles.

Part II - Key Biblical Teaching      In Matthew 23:34 Jesus said, "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and 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." *dia tou/to ivdou. evgw. avposte,llw pro.j u`ma/j profh,taj kai. sofou.j kai. grammatei/j\ evx auvtw/n avpoktenei/te kai. staurw,sete kai. evx auvtw/n mastigw,sete evn tai/j sunagwgai/j u`mw/n kai. diw,xete avpo. po,lewj eivj po,lin\* The context is Jesus admonition to the Jews and Jewish leaders. Jesus' testimony is they have always persecuted the prophets God sent. Jesus is going to send more witnesses, knowing that the Jewish leaders will persecute them also. This future event of sending and persecution will fulfill the violence of the city (v. 35) and then God will judge the city and the leaders. There are two issues here which pertain to our limited study. First, what kinds of persecution will occur? Second, how can God send his children into situations in which He knows they will be persecuted?

Jesus uses four words to describe the persecution:

Kill (Apoktneite)

Crucify (Staurosete)

Scourge (Mastigosete)

Persecute (Diosete )

All these words occur here in the indicative future active second person plural. There is one sense of progression from the specific action of the first three to the general statement of the fourth. There is also a progression from murder in the first two actions, to scourging, to persecution. There is no difference in the judgment against these actions – they are all examples

of wrongful actions against God's prophets. There will be violence suffered just for being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, in a fallen world.

The second issue concerns the ethics of sending people into harms' way with expectation, even knowledge, that they will be persecuted or killed. We humans justify this in time of war when our own lives or our fellows' lives are at risk. Some lives are risked, with the knowledge that some will die, in order to save others and a way of life. Verse 35 says that God does this so that the full amount of blood may be spilt to justify the final destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish leaders. God does not cause the violence; He hates it. But He allows it for a purpose. This reminds us of the definition which takes into account the purpose of violence. The prophets who are called and experience violence simply have to recognize that their life is in God's hands and if it is spent, it is for a purpose. There are already lives at risk, the lives and souls of the ones to whom the prophet speaks; often these are the ones who perpetrate the violence.

Jesus speaks directly to His disciples in a similar way. This teaching occurs at the last supper. "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also." (John 15:20) *mnhmoneu,ete tou/ lo,gou ou- evgw. ei=pon u`mi/n( Ouvk e;stin dou/loj mei,zwn tou/ kuri,ou autou/Å eiv evme. evdi,wxan( kai. u`ma/j diw,xousin\ eiv to.n lo,gon mou evth,rhsan( kai. to.n u`me,teron thrh,sousinÅ* The word for persecute is the general word used in many other passages. The change is from the aorist tense to the future tense. What they did to Jesus they will do to his followers. Here in the United States we have freedom of speech and the types of persecution takes less obvious forms (Fetzer, 2001). In other countries our missionaries, our brothers and sisters, do not share these rights. Whether the persecution takes more or less violent

form, there will be persecution. This passage also includes a counter-result. Some people will listen to our word and receive it, as some listened to and received Jesus' word.

Based on these two passages we can say that our witness is necessary even at risk of persecution (1) so some can turn to obey Christ and (2) so full justification is present for the just judgment of God against sin.

Jesus does not suggest that most people will simply ignore the gospel and the speakers of the word. As we reach people with the gospel we see new converts and we see new opposition. In effect, when we preach we create new family and new enemies.

Part III – Population and Mission Focus      World population divides into the following categories, which show our potential missions, friends, and future enemies.

Table 3 (Clinton, 2005)

Chinese (1.2 billion),  
Hindu ( .9 billion),  
Muslim (1.2 billion),  
Christian (2 billion)  
all others (1.1 billion)

As we more effectively preach to non-Christian audiences/people groups we will see increasing church growth and increasing opposition. World population will double; on average each city will double by 2050 (Clinton, 2005). As population increases dramatically violence will increase, not only by matching population growth and increased crowding but especially struggle and warfare over limited natural resources and farmland. The next half-century of missions will focus on Chinese, Hindu, and Muslim peoples. The focus will be on equipping leaders for the church, using a very different model than seminary education in the West.

The Bible also talks about how we should respond to violence. The most general passage in the epistles is II Cor. 12:10 “Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

διο. ευδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις, αἰῶν ἐν ὑβρίσιν, ἐν ἀνάγκαις, ἐν διωγμοῖς, καὶ στενοχωρίαις ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι.

Paul includes five forms of weakness. Three (weakness, distress, difficulties) could be caused by life in general or by others. Two (insults and persecutions) are specifically caused by other people. All these things take away from our person, they make us weak. But when we are weak in ourselves then Christ comes in to help us and we become strong (dunatos) or powerful.

If we respond in faith to the situation and expect God to be strong through us, then how do we respond outwardly? Table 2 gave us four responses: bless the ones doing violence to us, be content that this is of God, endure the pain with faith, persevere in being faithful to the gospel. Blessing those who persecute us will bring a deeper response, either positive, seeking Christ, or negative, furthering persecution. None of these responses include returning violence with violence.

Conclusion - May God help us to respond His ways rather than to use force/violence in return, thereby losing our value base, and becoming part of the problem. Where we have legal rights to freedom we can use these; where we do not have this freedom we still have the call to preach the gospel, entrusting our souls to God.

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