

Christians and Self-Defense

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. "What does the Bible say about self-defense?" Disclaimers
 - 1. Persons who believe that Christians cannot raise a hand in self-defense will be unhappy with this lesson.
 - 2. Persons who believe that Christians must defend themselves will be unhappy with this lesson.
 - 3. But, as it is my purpose to make the Lord happy with this lesson, I do not plan to be concerned about the first two groups.
 - 4. As you examine the word of God and the arguments presented in this study, do not listen for that which only confirms your present view
 - 5. We are not considering civil government and Christians serving as police officers or soldiers, nor capital punishment, euthanasia, or any other loss of life other than related to self-defense. Do not treat these matters as the same question
- B. After introducing and defining this issue, we will consider this matter in four questions:
 - 1. What is written in the Old Testament?
 - 2. What is written in the New Testament?
 - 3. What is written about self-defense?
 - 4. What is written about lethal force?
- C. There are three viewpoints on this troubling question: two conflicting, extreme schools of thought and the Bible's answer.
 - 1. There are numerous passages that appear speak of Christians as abjectly pacifistic - Prov. 25:21-22; Matt. 5:39; Rom. 12:17
 - 2. And there are many passages that speak about war and violence that appear to show God's approval: David and Goliath - 1Sam. 17; Israel and the conquest of Canaan
 - 3. There appears to be an apparent conflict in Jesus instructions before His crucifixion: get a sword, but don't use a sword - Lk 22:36, 38, 49-51
 - 4. As with many questions in our lives, self-defense has to do with wisdom, understanding, and discernment
 - 5. Peter was acting unwisely in the situation. He was trying to stop something that was not supposed to be stopped. We must be wise as to when to strike out in defense and when not to.
- D. The Bible says little of self-defense when one's life or property is threatened
 - 1. Ex. 22:2-3 - When a thief breaks into someone's house at night and that person defends his home and slays the thief, God does not hold him accountable for that death. However, God does not wish for him to take the law into his own hands. This is speaking of thievery, not an attack. If the thief were to attack the defender even during the day, self-defense would be justified.
 - 2. In the martial arts, the adage is "Restrain your physical abilities by spiritual attainment." Just because one has the ability to bring great harm doesn't mandate that he should use it. Just because we can break

someone's arm doesn't mean we need to use that ability. Just because we have a gun doesn't mean we need to fire on someone who breaks into the home.

E. The Saint James Church massacre in Kenilworth, Cape Town, South Africa on July 25, 1993 by four men of the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA). 11 members of the congregation were killed and 58 wounded. The attack occurred during the Sunday evening service. Armed with M26 hand grenades and R4 assault rifles, they threw grenades and then opened fire on the congregation. One member of the congregation, Charl van Wyk, who wrote a book about the event (Shooting Back), returned fire with a .38 special, wounding one of the attackers. At this point they fled the church. (Wikipedia)

1. Among mainstream Christianity, a growing sentiment allows for and even endorses Christians taking up weapons for their own defense or the defense of other Christians.
2. Enthusiasts of this story look at it partly with satisfaction that one the attackers was harmed, and partly with disappointment that more worshipers were not carrying guns so more could have been saved.
3. Some Christians point to God's instructions to the nation of Israel to destroy the idolatrous Canaanites - Num. 33:50-53, 55
4. They overlook God's promise to Israel that **He** would drive out the inhabitants of the land if Israel would obey Him - Ex. 23:20-30
5. Their basic premise is that Christians are perfectly justified in killing in self-defense or in anticipation of a crime. They claim society in general would be much safer if we had a more fully armed citizenry.
6. Statistics indicate this is true; 1,800 felons serving time in prisons across the nation were questioned
 - a. 81% agreed the smart criminal will try to find out if a potential victim is armed
 - b. 74% said that burglars avoided occupied dwellings for fear of being shot
 - c. 80% of felons using handguns had encountered armed citizens
 - d. 40% didn't commit a specific crime for fear the victim was armed.
 - e. 34% were frightened off or shot at by armed victims.
 - f. 57% said that the typical criminal feared being shot by citizens more than he feared being shot by police.
 - g. Annually since 1974, 1,500-2,800 felons were legally killed in self-defense or justifiable shootings by civilians, and 8,000-16,000 criminals are wounded. This compares to 300-600 justifiable homicides by police.
 - h. It is estimated that each year Americans use guns for protection from criminals more than 2.5 million times annually (U.S. Department of Justice).

Rushforth, et al., "Accidental Firearm Fatalities in a Metropolitan County" 100 American Journal of Epidemiology 499 (1975).

Rushforth, et al., "Violent Death in a Metropolitan County," 297 New England Journal of Medicine 531, 533 (1977).

Kellermann, et al., "Gun Ownership as a Risk Factor for Homicide in the Home," New England Journal of Medicine 467 (1993).

Polsby, "False Promise of Gun Control," Atlantic Monthly, March 1994.

Wright and Rossi, Armed and Considered Dangerous: A Survey of Felons and Their Firearms (N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter, 1986).

Kleck, interview, Orange County Register, Sept. 19, 1993.

7. That's okay for a secular nation that grants armed self-defense as a civil right to its citizens. Although, the fact that civil government grants this right does not necessarily mean that God authorizes it.
8. The question for Christians to ponder is this: Even though we benefit from living in a society where gun ownership is a constitutional right, are we justified in intentionally harming or killing another human being?

I. WHAT IS WRITTEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

- A. The children of Israel were both a nation and a religious assembly. Israel's civil laws given by God through Moses are not directly applicable today because we do not live in a church-state with God at the helm, and the Law of Moses is no longer binding in the Christian Dispensation. Yet, those laws show God's intent in civil matters.
 1. Numbers 35:9-28 shows that God recognizes two classifications of killing: accidental and intentional.
 - a. Deut. 19:5 - Accidental killing
 - b. Deut. 19:11-13 - Intentional killing
 2. Ex. 22:2-3 shows that God recognizes a third classification: accidental killing resulting from the intent to protect oneself from intruders at night
- B. There were times that God wanted Israel to be armed and to defend itself
 1. Prov. 25:26; Judges 5:8; 1Sam. 13:19-20, 22; 2Chron. 17:10; Neh. 4:17-18
 2. However, God often emphasized His authority against which enemy Israel would turn its weapons

II. WHAT IS WRITTEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

- A. "In the New Testament, God does not promise His children complete protection from physical harm"
 1. Matt. 5:11-12, 44, 10:23; John 15:20, 16:33; 1Thes. 3:4; 2Tim. 3:12
 2. 2Cor. 11:23-28; Rom. 8:36; 1Cor. 15:30-31; 2Cor. 4:11
- B. "Jesus taught complete pacifism" - Matt. 5:38-39
 1. This viewpoint dismisses Jesus' teaching and examples to the contrary
 2. Cleansing temple - John 2:14-15; eternal punishment - Matt. 25:30, 46
- C. "Christians are instructed against responding to evil with more evil"
 1. Rom. 12:17-21; 1Thes. 5:15; 1Peter 3:9 (based on Prov. 20:22)
 2. However, the text speaks of responding with evil; it has yet to be established that self-defense is evil; do not assume
- D. "Vengeance is God's prerogative" - Rom. 12:19
 1. However, the text says vengeance, not self-defense; the first is motivated by malicious intent, the second is forced upon one by another's evil intent

- E. "Punishment is the government's responsibility" - Rom. 13:4
 - 1. However, the context speaks of punishment of evil, not defense from it
- F. "We are to give place to wrath; the wrath of man is a work of the flesh"
 - 1. James 1:19-20; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8
 - 2. However, this is about acting in wrath, not in self-defense
- G. These passages shed light on a Christian's disposition toward ending a life, but say little if anything about doing so in self-defense
 - 1. It is presumptuous to assume that because the text does not specifically forbid the use of violence in self-defense, it gives permission to do so.
 - 2. In scripture and Bible authority, apparent silence does not give consent.
- H. The Divinely approved and most successful way to both overcome evil and change the evil person is by reacting with active good will
 - 1. How God seeks to change the world - Rom. 5:8; John 3:16
 - 2. How Jesus sought to change the world - 1Peter 2:21-25
 - 3. Illustration: Kim Joon-gon witnessed 2,000 people out of 20,000 residents of Chunnam Island murdered by Communists. They dragged his family to a spot where 160 people from two villages had gathered to beat the Christians. There Kim's father and wife were beaten to death and Kim was left for dead. When he revived and sought safety at an acquaintance's house, he was turned over to the Communists. Only the sudden appearance of an American ship off the coast saved, for the Communist soldiers hurried away to battle. He hid out in the countryside until the South Korean army captured the island. The Communists who had killed his wife and father were arrested. Because it was wartime, the police chief had authority to execute without trial. But as the chief prepared to kill the men, Kim pleaded, "Spare them. They were forced to kill." The police chief was surprised. "It was your family they killed! Why do you now ask for their lives?" Kim replied quietly, "Because the Lord, whose I am and whom I serve, would have me show mercy to them." The Communists were spared execution because of Kim's plea. News of his action spread among other Communist supporters in the area. When Kim later ascended a mountain to preach to Communists now hiding out from the South Koreans, he was not killed. Many of the Communists became Christians, and when Kim finally left the island, there was a flourishing church of 108 members. (Dictionary of Illustrations, p. 188)
- I. Reacting to evil with good will does not always convert the evildoer
 - 1. Jesus was crucified, enduring hostility by sinners - Heb. 12:2-3
 - 2. He committed Himself to God - 1Peter 2:23, 4:19
 - 3. It distinguishes Christians from sinners - Luke 6:32-34
 - 4. It makes us like our Heavenly Father - Luke 6:35-36
 - 5. It brings us blessings - 1Peter 3:9-12
- J. Christians are not permitted to use violence in ANY spiritual endeavor
 - 1. Eph. 6:12; John 18:36

III. WHAT IS WRITTEN ABOUT SELF-DEFENSE?

- A. Do Christians have the duty to defend themselves? Are we commanded to arm ourselves and use violence against those who would harm us?

1. Absolutely not! No proponent of self-defense can make the case from the scriptures that God requires Christians to fight to save their physical lives or their property
 2. If this is the case, Jesus Christ and 12 of the 14 apostles sinned by failing to protect themselves from being killed.
 3. If it is authorized at all, it is authorized by permissive authority and not by restrictive authority
 - a. Illustration: Extending our lives with extraordinary medical means is permitted by God, but He does not require it
 4. If it is authorized by permissive authority, permission is set aside when there is a conflict with restrictive authority or a higher spiritual priority
 - a. Eating foods offered to idols is permitted, but must be set aside for the weaker brother if it leads him to sin
- B. "It can be considered part of providing for one's family"
1. 1Tim. 5:8 - Christians must provide for their families
 - a. But we are not told how much one must provide beyond the necessities; the amount of provisions are not mandated; one is permitted to provide abundance and not just essentials; however, not when abundance interferes with spiritual needs
 - b. All throughout the dispensations of time, God's people found it necessary to defend their homes and families in a world without an active police force or a standing militia
 - b. There were many means of doing so apart from physical force; the means used were left up to the providers
 - c. While God did not mandate in any dispensation that one use force, His commands governing its use clearly imply that He permitted it for those who chose to use it - Ex. 22:2
 - d. God did not condemn those who used it, nor did He condemn those who did not
 - e. Use caution when asserting one way or the other in view of the Bible's instruction - Prov. 14:12
- C. "It can be considered part of our obligation to preserve life when and where possible, as long as it does not conflict with a higher spiritual purpose"
1. 1Cor. 6:19-20 - Our bodies belong to God and must be cared for.
 - a. However, preserving our physical life does not take precedence over the needs of our spiritual life
 2. There is an obligation to protect others in danger, but the means, method and extent are left to the individual; physical violence may be permitted but is not mandated
 - a. Psalm 82:4; Prov. 24:11; Ez. 33:6; Deut. 22:8; Ex. 21:29-31
- D. "Life is precious; it is a gift from God Who created human life in His image, and it should be preserved where possible" - Gen. 9:5-6; Num. 35:33
1. Means is not mandated; preserving life is set aside for higher purposes
- E. "Possession of weapons is never discouraged in scripture"
1. Those quick to resort to violence often die by violence - Matt 26:52
 2. The Lord hates one who loves violence - Psalm 11:5

3. The sword is not always the appropriate or even necessary response
4. There are greater means of protection than weapons
- F. "The Lord often uses military language to depict spiritual things"
 1. Zech. 9:14; Psalm 7:13, 18:14, 21:12, 64:7; Hab. 3:11; Deut. 32:42
 2. 2Sam. 22:15; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16, 2:16, 19:15
 3. If this were an argument justifying the use of physical violence, it would justify the use of physical violence in spiritual endeavors. That which proves too much, proves nothing.

IV. WHAT IS WRITTEN ABOUT LETHAL FORCE?

- A. Guns, knives, weapons are merely tools, and none of these things can guarantee protection, any more than owning a fire extinguisher guarantees that your house won't burn down.
 1. Psalm 44:6-7; Neh. 4:14, 20; 1Sam. 17:47
- B. When it is proper to employ lethal force?
 1. Never in hatred, revenge, jealousy, or anger
 - a. 1Sam. 25:32-33; Titus 1:7; Rom. 12:19
 2. Never in response to an insult or harm - Luke 6:27-30
 3. Do not admire or praise someone who uses violence - Prov. 3:31-32

Conclusion:

- A. Keep the right perspective in this matter. Though there is approval and permission in the scriptures to possess and to use weapons if necessary, three things must be remembered:
 1. In the New Testament, there are no examples of believers taking up a weapon in self-defense.
 2. The emphasis in the New Testament is not on physical self-defense or righteous use of lethal force. Rather, emphasis is on Godly living, suffering affliction and persecution for Christ, and teaching by word and example the precious Gospel of Jesus Christ.
 3. Possession of weapons and acquiring the skill to use them in self-defense is permitted, but not required by Scripture.
- B. If we are governed daily by the scriptures, when the need for self-defense arises, we will know whether, and to what extent, we should use it
 1. Rom. 14:16; 2Cor. 8:21; 1Thes. 5:15; 1Peter 3:9; 1Peter 4:12-19