

A Biblical Theology of Self-Defense

The issue of self-defense is a pressing one for Christians today. It is not an issue that we can ignore or sidestep. American Christians view physical persecution as a problem faced by the church in countries like Sudan and the Philippines, but the reality is that violence against Christians is increasing here in the United States as well:

- On December 8 and 9, 2007, a young man killed two people at a Youth With a Mission center and two more at New Life Community Church in Colorado Springs, CO.¹ His stated motive on his MySpace page was “to kill and injure as many of you...as I can especially Christians...”
- On August 12, 2007 a gunman entered First Congregational Church (a Micronesian church), killed three people and injured five others.
- In March 2005 a gunman in Milwaukee murdered seven people attending church services at a hotel before taking his own life.²

These are just a few of the many examples that have made national headlines over the last couple of years. These were attacks on Christians gathered in their places of worship on Sunday mornings and do not include all of the violent acts against individual Christians that are not connected to their worship services.

In 2005 Arizona ranked 13th in the nation in violent crimes³ and first for overall crime in 2003. Clearly this is a major issue for all Arizonans, and as Christians we are not immune to violence simply because of our allegiance to Christ. Many examples from the New Testament can be shown of Christians being the subject of physical assault, but perhaps none better than the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:25-27:

²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Corinthians 11:25-27)⁴

¹ <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,316387,00.html> (accessed 6/23/08)

² <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/03/12/national/main679761.shtml> (accessed 6/23/08)

³ http://azcjc.gov/pubs/home/Crime_Trends_2005.pdf (accessed 6/23/08) This document was compiled by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission using data from the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data, making it a valuable statistical tool.

⁴ All Scripture quotations, unless indicated, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, and 1995 by The Lockman Foundation, and are used by permission.

The question we must ask ourselves as Christians is how we should respond to violence done against us. What does the Word of God (our standard for faith and practice) have to say about the subject? Should we adopt a passive stance of non-resistance or preach the gospel of “Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition”? Neither of these extremes represents the biblical view of self-defense. A proper understanding of the biblical text leads us to the view that Christians can defend themselves against violence and must use wisdom and discernment in the application of that truth.

This issue is hotly debated among Bible-believing Christians and therefore we must approach the subject with humility and with caution. We must seek to understand the view of other Christians to refrain from making incorrect caricaturizations of their position. In order to interact with Christian pacifism we must know what it teaches.

Christian Pacifism

John Howard Yoder presents a modern adaptation to the classic Mennonite view of passive nonresistance in his book *The Politics of Jesus*.⁵ He argues that Jesus is interested in social and political issues, but His strategy is to stay away from the game of socio-political control and instead adopt the practice of nonresistance. This view believes that Christians must reject the world’s system of violence and follow their Savior to the cross. They point to Matthew 26:47-52 in support for this idea:

⁴⁷While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, who came from the chief priests and elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, “Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him.” ⁴⁹Immediately Judas went to Jesus and said, “Hail, Rabbi!” and kissed Him. ⁵⁰And Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you have come for.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. ⁵¹And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. ⁵²Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. (Matthew 26:47-52)

Verse 52 is very important to advocates of nonresistance, as Jesus rebukes Peter’s violence and commands him to put his sword away. Thus within the view of nonresistance Jesus does not allow for self-defense, instead commanding Christians to suffer wrong rather than retaliate with violence against violence. The other passage that nonresistance advocates view as central to their position is Jesus’ admonition to “turn the other cheek”:

²⁷“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹“Whoever hits you

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1994)

*on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.*³⁰ *“Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back.*³¹ *“Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. (Luke 6:27-31; cf. Matthew 5:38-42)*

This is the main passage that advocates nonresistance in the eyes of Christian pacifists. Even in the face of physical assault Jesus commands his disciples to “turn the other cheek” and forego self-defense. Whether the offense is physical (a strike to the cheek) or financial (the taking of the outer garment) the response of the disciple must be nonresistance. In this way the Christian follows Christ’s example of nonresistance in the face of rejection and assault and emulates their Savior.

An Evaluation of Pacifism

While it is true that Jesus taught His disciples to “turn the other cheek,” many if not most evangelical scholars do not believe that pacifism or nonresistance is the central point of Jesus’ words.⁶ Rather, to the point that Jesus is making here is continued reaching out in the face of insult. The Hebrew concept of the insult is contained in Job 16:10:

*“They have gaped at me with their mouth,
They have slapped me on the cheek with contempt;
They have massed themselves against me. (Job 16:10)*

Part of Job’s lament is that his adversary (v. 9) slaps him on the cheek with contempt. This was commonly associated with expulsion from the synagogue in Jesus’ day⁷ and pictured far more of a social and personal insult than a physical assault. To a Jew in Jesus’ day being slapped in the face was a grave insult akin to someone spitting in our face today. Any physical damage is almost incidental to the insult. Jesus’ intent, then, is to command his disciples to continue to reach out to their enemies, even in the face of grave personal insult. In its historical and cultural context the command to “turn the other cheek” does not command nonresistance or pacifism but rather continued outreach despite insult. When Christians are insulted or slandered we must continue to reach out to those who insult us. This has no bearing upon our response to rapists or armed robbers, however.

It is very instructive in Matthew 26:52 that Jesus did not command Peter to rid himself of his sword. Instead Jesus told Peter to put it away in light of Jesus’ fulfillment of God’s plan. Christ’s nonresistance to His crucifixion is a manifestation of His unique mission to die for the

⁶ See Bock, Darrell L. *Luke Volume 1: 1:1-9:50*. Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 592. See also Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke : A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New international Greek testament commentary. (Exeter [Eng.]: Paternoster Press, 1978), 260; Stein, Robert H. *Luke*. The New American Commentary. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 207; Nolland,.; *Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 35a. (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 296.

⁷ See 1 Esdras 4:30 and *Didache* 1:4

sins of the world. Even with this in mind there are clearly instances in Scripture of Jesus using physical violence; in John 2:15 Jesus used a “scourge of cords” to drive the sellers and moneychangers out of the temple. All violence cannot be evil if Jesus used violence to protect the holiness of the temple.

The Biblical Case for Self-Defense

The Bible does present evidence that self-defense is acceptable within the guidelines of wisdom. One of the titles of God in the Old Testament, “The LORD of hosts” (Exodus 12:41) pictures God as the omnipotent Warrior at the head of His army. The author of Hebrews commends many Old Testament saints for their military acts of faith in Hebrews 11:30-40. Gideon, Deborah, and others were anointed by God to lead others into battle and conduct war.

We are commanded not to murder (Exodus 20:13), which may be defined as the unauthorized taking of human life. Not all loss of life can be defined as murder, though, as evidenced by God’s command of the Israelites to go to war. (Numbers 21:1-3) That command against murder must be seen in light of some expansion on the topic of the taking of life given in Exodus 22:2-3:

²“If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account. ³But if the sun has risen on him, there will be bloodguiltiness on his account. He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. (Exodus 22:2-3)

In context the Lord is authorizing the death of a thief that is caught in the act of thievery. However, if he gets away with his thievery only to be apprehended later then he cannot be killed without incurring guilt. The death of this thief is authorized, presumably because he represents a threat to the owner of the home and his family such that deadly force is justified. Once the thief leaves the threat is removed and therefore deadly force is not authorized.

Perhaps the most significant passage with respect to self-defense is Nehemiah 4:14:

When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people: “Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses.” (Nehemiah 4:14)

Nehemiah was authorized by Artaxerxes I to perform his work, but because of the criminal activity of Sanballat and Tobiah was in danger of assault and attack. His response is a rousing call to defense of the walls of Jerusalem. After the immediate attack was averted the men maintained their armed state (verses 16-18) and readiness to defend themselves if necessary.

In the New Testament we see examples of the same ethic.

³⁶*And He said to them, “But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one.*

³⁷*“For I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, ‘And He was numbered with transgressors’; for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment.”*

³⁸*They said, “Lord, look, here are two swords.” And He said to them, “It is enough.” (Luke 22:36-38)*

In Luke 22:36 Jesus commands his disciples who do not own a sword to go and sell their outer garment to buy one. Jesus is preparing His disciples here for ministry and evangelism after He has departed, and in verse 38 when they reply that they are armed Jesus approves of their ownership of the swords. The Greek word here for sword (μάχαιρα, *machaira*) referred to a relatively short sword that was used by the people of Palestine to defend themselves while travelling from robbers and wild animals. Jesus commanded His disciples to have such an implement for their own defense.

While Jesus commands the disciples to have some form of defense, we also see that wisdom and discernment are vital to the application of self-defense. In Matthew 26:52-54 Jesus rebukes Peter for cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest. In the context of Jesus’ fulfillment of His mission He is rebuking Peter for his failure to discern the true nature of the situation as necessary in God’s plan. Likewise, in Exodus 22:2-3 God tells us that discernment must be used; if the thief is caught in the act he may be considered hostile, but capture after the fact removes the threat of injury and thus the need for deadly force.

Application

The Word of God in review does not prohibit self-defense and in fact commands us to take precautions to protect innocent life and liberty. However, we must always temper our response to line up with the biblical witness of wisdom in application.

1. It is perfectly acceptable for a Christian to study self-defense and martial arts. Christians should avoid those arts that deal with idolatry such as ancestor worship or practices that come into conflict with a biblical worldview. Martial arts training can add to our awareness and understanding of how to avoid potentially dangerous situations and can therefore prevent situations in which physical self-defense is necessary.
2. We must obey the command to “be in subjection to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1) and understand that while a particular instance may be defensible biblically it may not be defensible under the laws of our state. In such instances we must be prepared to incur the penalty that our state’s laws mandate for our actions.

3. As we learn in Exodus 22:2-3, deadly force is authorized when an intruder threatens our lives or the life of someone else. In Arizona⁸, the standard that is applied is the test of a “reasonable person.” In other words, would a reasonable person resort to self-defense in the situation in which you did?
4. We are authorized to use force to prevent assault on another person (such as rape, violence, or murder) as if they were ourselves. We must always heed the biblical injunction to use wisdom in our dealings and respond properly to the situation. Unless a loss of life is imminent, it is not biblically defensible to use deadly force to defend property.
5. Arizona is considered an “open carry” state and a “shall issue” state, meaning that it is permissible to private citizens without violent criminal convictions to carry a firearm as long as that firearm is visible to a casual observer⁹. It is also possible to be permitted by the state to carry a firearm concealed.
6. As Christians we must live in subjection to our authority. If a person wants to take martial arts training or other unarmed defense that is fine. A person who wishes to carry a weapon should have the consent of their authorities when doing so. That means that if a person wanted to carry a firearm at work they should have the approval of their supervisor or manager; if someone wanted to carry a firearm at church they should seek the approval of their church leadership to do so.

⁸ This is not to be construed in any way as legal advice or binding. It is my application of the Arizona Revised Statutes regarding the criminal code, which may be found online at <http://www.azleg.state.az.us/arizonarevisedstatutes.asp?title=13> (accessed 6/23/08)

⁹ There are restrictions on this in terms of where a firearm may be brought; see ARS for more.