

IS BEARING ARMS IN SELF DEFENSE A BIBLICAL CONCEPT?

A Research Paper

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*I affirm the honor code.

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IS BEARING ARMS IN SELF-DEFENSE A BIBLICAL CONCEPT?

The founding documents of the United States of America speak of an inalienable right to life and liberty and the right to keep and bear arms in defense of life and liberty. However, there is an increasingly heated debate between those who support the right of individuals to keep and bear arms and those who oppose it. Should Christians take a stance on this issue, and what should that stance be? The underlying question is whether or not bearing arms in self-defense is a biblical concept. In other words, should Christians defend themselves?

A right is morally neutral—it does not answer the question of whether or not someone should do something, only that they have a right to do it. Likewise, weapons are morally neutral, and like any other tool, can be used for good or evil. The only way to determine the morality of bearing arms in self-defense from a biblical standpoint is to examine what the Bible says about self-defense and the keeping and bearing of arms. This paper will demonstrate that not only is bearing arms in self-defense morally and biblically permissible but, in some cases, even obligatory or supererogatory. This will be accomplished by examining natural law and the teachings of both the Old and New Testament scriptures from both the pacifist (self-defense is always wrong) and selectivist (self-defense is sometimes right and sometimes wrong) viewpoint.

Natural Law

For the Christian, the Bible is the ultimate authority on all matters of life and death and will therefore be the primary focus of this paper. However, it is also helpful to look at natural law (the law that God has written on the hearts of all people) to determine whether self-defense is morally permissible.

“The ‘natural’ or God-given rights of free men take precedence over written rights. And no natural or God-given right was more widely recognized by the Founders than that of

bearing arms in self-defense.”¹ Bearing arms in self-defense, or for that matter, in defense of one's country, sometimes includes taking the life of another human being. For this reason, Christian and non-Christian pacifists alike reject the idea that anyone should ever be armed. Semi-reformed pacifist Cheyney C. Ryan wrote, “The sources of my pacifism were more philosophical than religious: it seemed to me then that no adequate justification could be given for the taking of human life.”² The question then is: “From what is the right to kill in self-defense derived?”

In her book, *Permissible Killing: The Self-Defence Justification of Homicide*, Suzanne Uniacke argued that in both law and morality, a successful plea of self-defense is a justification rather than an excuse.³ In other words, self-defense is an exception to the general prohibition of homicide rather than an excusable infringement. Uniacke argued that the moral permissibility of homicide in self-defense is widely held to derive from natural law and that the legitimate right of self-preservation stems from the unjust aggressor having forfeited their own right.⁴ By nature, the essential factor of force used in self-defense is that it is defensive.⁵

Ryan, who now argues that situations exist in which it is acceptable for pacifists to engage in self-defense, contends that the asymmetry of the self-defense situation lies more in the realm of the responsibility of the aggressor than their loss of rights. He submits:

When Aggressor threatens Victim, his actions have created a situation in which *someone's* life will be lost (he hopes Victim's). Victim is not responsible for this situation, it is merely presented to him. But given it, Victim can determine *whose* life is lost, and in choosing to defend himself Victim determines that it will be Aggressor's life. In this sense the true responsibility for the taking of life rests not with Victim, for Aggressor's actions have made this inevitable. In pointing this out, the appeal to self-defense shows that the real blame for

¹ Richard Poe, *The Seven Myths of Gun Control: Reclaiming the Truth About Guns, Crime, and the Second Amendment* (Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2001), 150.

² Cheyney C. Ryan, "Self-Defense, Pacifism, and the Possibility of Killing," *Ethics* 93, no. 3 (April 1983): 508.

³ Suzanne Uniacke, *Permissible Killing: The Self-Defence Justification of Homicide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6.

⁴ Uniacke, *Permissible Killing*, 57.

⁵ Uniacke, *Permissible Killing*, 159.

Aggressor's losing his life rests with Aggressor himself.⁶

By appealing to the responsibility argument, Ryan has shifted the burden of proof onto the pacifist, who must now demonstrate "that there is a positive presumption for Victim to sacrifice himself and not Aggressor."⁷

Natural law and common logic indicate that self-defense and even the use of weapons in self-defense is permissible.

The Teaching of the Old Testament

Thou Shalt Not Kill

Pacifists often quote the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exod 20:13 KJV). That is not, however, the best translation. Most modern translations read, "You shall not murder" (NASB, ESV, NIV, NKJV). The Hebrew word, *ratsach*, though not technically restricted to murder, is never used for executing a criminal, slaying an enemy in battle, or killing in self-defense. Horowitz commented, "Homicide was justifiable when done to prevent a forcible or atrocious crime like rape of a betrothed maiden, pederasty or murder (*M. Sanhedrin* VII, 7), or breaking in at night (*Sanhedrin* 72b; *M. T. Theft*, IX, 7), or when done by an officer in carrying out a lawful mandate of the court like the execution of a condemned criminal."⁸

The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 135 asks: "What are the duties required in the sixth commandment?" The answer includes the necessity of self-defense and the defense of others. "The duties required in the sixth commandment are . . . to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes . . . which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defense thereof against violence . . . and protecting and defending the innocent."⁹

⁶ Ryan, "Self-Defense, Pacifism, and the Possibility of Killing," 515-516.

⁷ Ryan, "Self-Defense, Pacifism, and the Possibility of Killing," 517.

⁸ George Horowitz, *The Spirit of Jewish Law: A Brief Account of Biblical and Rabbinical Jurisprudence with a Special Note on Jewish Law and the State of Israel* (New York: Central Book Company, 1973), 192.

⁹ *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 1648, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-larger-catechism/>

Question 136 then asks, “What are the sins forbidden in the sixth commandment? Answer: The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense.”¹⁰

Neither the historical understanding of the sixth commandment nor the language of the commandment itself implies that it is an absolute prohibition against the taking of human life, but rather that at times it is permissible and even obligatory.

Killing a Thief

Exodus 22:2-3 says, “If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account. “*But* if the sun has risen on him, there will be bloodguiltiness on his account” (NASB). This verse appears in the part of the Pentateuch known as “The Book of the Covenant” (Exod 21-23) which “follows the declaration of the Ten Commandments and provides a concrete application of the principles of truth and justice contained in the Ten Commandments by means of ‘statutes’ and judgments.”¹¹

In this case law, two scenarios are given. Both assume that people have a right to defend both themselves and their property from theft. In the first scenario, a thief enters a house at night and is killed by the homeowner. In this case, the killing is justified as self-defense. However, when the thief breaks in during the day, the situation changes because the homeowner could more clearly see the degree of threat and call for help.¹²

This case law clearly establishes the righteousness of self-defense in that a man is permitted to defend himself and his family, even to the point of using deadly force. There is also the implication here that weapons are permissible for defense. “However, this case law also

¹⁰ *The Westminster Larger Catechism*.

¹¹ William Einwechter, “Biblical Law and Self-defense,” *The Christian Statesman* 140 (January-February 1997), accessed October 29, 2004, <http://www.nationalreform.org/statesman/97/biblawn.html>.

¹² John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 100.

restrains the individual in the use of weapons in self-defense. He must be very careful, lest he use deadly force when it is not called for. If he does he is guilty of a crime, and must pay with his own life.”¹³ The bottom line is that God's law authorizes the defense of life by deadly force if necessary, but it does not permit property defense in the same manner.

The Teaching of the New Testament

Turning the Other Cheek

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the crowd, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt 5:38-39 NASB).

Of this passage, John MacArthur commented, “Probably no part of the Sermon on the Mount has been so misinterpreted and misapplied as 5:38–42. It has been interpreted to mean that Christians are to be sanctimonious doormats. It has been used to promote pacifism, conscientious objection to military service, lawlessness, anarchy, and a host of other positions that it does not support.”¹⁴

As MacArthur indicates, many Christians and non-Christians mistakenly interpret these verses as a command to be completely nonresistant, passive, and submissive when confronted by another person. On the contrary, MacArthur and other scholars reject the idea that pacifism (or nonresistance) is the essential point of Christ’s teaching in this passage.

The Sermon on the Mount, from which this passage is taken, deals with how Christians should conduct themselves. In this particular passage, Christ is correcting the teaching of the Pharisees that conduct proper for the civil government—that is, taking vengeance—was also proper for an individual. Jesus begins this passage by saying, "You have heard that it was

¹³ Einwechter, “Biblical Law and Self-defense.”

¹⁴ John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), Kindle Edition.

said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’” (v. 38). “This quotation is taken directly from the Old Testament (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21) and reflects the principle of *lex talionis*, one of the most ancient law codes. Simply put, it required that punishment exactly match the crime.”¹⁵ On the perversion of this principle, Matthew Henry remarked:

It was a direction to the judges of the Jewish nation what punishment to inflict in case of maims, for terror to such as would do mischief on the one hand, and for a restraint to such as have mischief done to them on the other hand, that they may not insist on a greater punishment than is proper . . . but, some of the Jewish teachers, who were not the most compassionate men in the world, insisted upon it as necessary that such revenge should be taken, even by private persons themselves, and that there was no room left for remission, or the acceptance of satisfaction.¹⁶

It is also important to interpret this passage in its cultural context. Notice that Jesus specifies the right cheek here to indicate what kind of assault this was. Typically, a strike from someone who is right-handed would land on the left cheek, meaning that Jesus is probably referring to a blow delivered with the back of the hand. To be backhanded was considered incredibly insulting. The insult that Jesus is referring to here is not so much a matter of bodily injury as it is of shame.¹⁷

MacArthur provides further insight into this humiliation, “Among Jews, a slap or other striking in the face was among the most demeaning and contemptuous of acts. . . . Even a slave would rather have been stuck across the back with a whip than be slapped in the face by his master’s hand. To strike someone on the **right cheek** would then be a vicious angry reaction, indicating an act of insult.”¹⁸

The principle taught in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-42 is not that Christians should never defend themselves or resist evil, but that Christians should take the high

¹⁵ MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)* (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 28605, Accordance.

¹⁷ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, Bible Students Commentary, trans. by Ray Togtman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 113.

¹⁸ MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*. Emphasis original.

road when our dignity is attacked. “The Christians retaliation for disgrace and hatred is to proceed *actively* against their persecutors . . . not with weapons of the flesh such as wrath, hatred, blasphemy, but with the weapons of the Spirit, the armour of a world-overcoming faith and a love that can pierce the hardest of hearts.”¹⁹

This passage has nothing to do with self-defense. Jesus is not instructing His followers to sit idly by while evil runs rampant all around them. The Bible never says to ignore evil, and Jesus was not teaching people to “turn the other cheek” in all circumstances. On the contrary, Christians have a moral obligation to resist evil and violence. In his *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, A.T. Robertson observed:

Jesus protested when smitten on the cheek (John 18:22). And Jesus denounced the Pharisees (Matt. 23) and fought the devil always. The language of Jesus is bold and picturesque and is not to be pressed too literally. Paradoxes startle and make us think. We are expected to fill in the other side of the picture. One thing certainly is meant by Jesus and that is that personal revenge is taken out of our hands, and that applies to “lynch-law.” Aggressive or offensive war by nations is also condemned, but not necessarily defensive war or defence against robbery and murder. Professional pacifism may be mere cowardice.²⁰

When he issues the command not to resist an evil person, he forbids retaliation in personal relationships and corrects the Pharisees' misinterpretation of the Mosaic law. However, contrary to popular opinion, Jesus is not saying to sit idly by and allow evil to run its course. Quite the opposite, Jesus and the apostles continually opposed evil by every means available.²¹ Jesus was appropriately severe and even violent when the situation called for it, such as making a whip and overturning tables to drive the vendors out of the temple (John 2:13-16; Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-46). And it was Jesus who said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt10:34 NASB).

¹⁹ William A. Mueller, “Self-defense and Retaliation in the Sermon on the Mount,” *Review and Expositor* 53 (January 1956): 51.

²⁰ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2001), paragraph 151, Accordance.

²¹ MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*.

Preparing the Disciples

In the hours before his betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus began preparing his disciples for his departure. “And He said to them, ‘When I sent you out without money belt and bag and sandals, you did not lack anything did you?’ They said, ‘No, nothing.’ 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’” (Luke 22:35-36 NASB).

While most scholars accept Jesus’ instructions as literal when it comes to the inoffensive provisions, many insist that the instruction to buy a sword was symbolic. Calvin stated, “It was truly shameful and stupid ignorance, that the disciples, after having been so often informed about bearing the cross, imagine that they must fight with swords of iron.”²² Likewise, Joel Green argued that Jesus’ words were “a metaphorical reference to the coming [spiritual] reality,” and his words “It is enough” an expression of his exasperation with the disciples’ dullness.²³ Even Bock, who asserts the view that Jesus is exhorting his disciples to take all three items—purse, knapsack, and sword—has the most natural force, sees the sword as a “symbol or preparation” in light of what he sees as a rebuke by Jesus.²⁴

Others argue that this passage should be interpreted literally. Obviously, Jesus’ earlier instructions to carry nothing was received and carried out literally, therefore, it seems logical that these instructions are to be taken literally as well. Furthermore, Jesus’ added instruction to sell their cloaks to purchase a sword if they did not have one seems out of place if he did not mean for it to be taken literally. The whole of Scripture makes it abundantly clear that Jesus was not advocating unwarranted use of force, retaliation, or the spread of the gospel through violence. At the same time, the need to provide for and defend oneself is at least intimated. As Butler

²² John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Vol. 3. Translated by the Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), <https://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment2/hag3.htm>

²³ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 774-775.

²⁴ Darrell L Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1747.

observed, “The present situation was quite different. Take whatever supplies and resources you have, Jesus told them. You will especially need a weapon for self-defense. Go sell whatever is necessary to get one. Satan had come after Jesus and his followers in full force. The persecution and arrests were about to begin. They must be ready to protect themselves.”²⁵

What is universally agreed upon is that Jesus is letting his disciples know that things will be different in the future. In “contrast to the former instructions for mission, full provision is now required.”²⁶ Furthermore, even when reduced to metaphor, the passage still contradicts the rigid pacifist viewpoint. Even if they are symbolic, the sword, purse, and bag are treated as everyday items for any person to carry. If weapons and defensive violence were illegitimate under all circumstances, Jesus would not have instructed the apostles to carry swords, even in metaphor.²⁷

Some insist that owning or carrying a weapon displays a lack of trust in God’s protection and provision. Indeed, God knows our needs and has promised to take care of us (Matt. 6:25-34; 10:19). However, trusting God to provide for us does not mean we are to be lazy and passive. Those who trust God are still expected to work for a living in order to provide for themselves and their family. 1 Timothy 5:8 says, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (NASB). Similarly, Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either” (NASB). For a man not to work yet expect to eat because he is “trusting God” would actually be to defy God.

Likewise, David wrote in Psalm 46:1, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (NASB), and also wrote in Psalm 144:1, “Blessed be the Lord, my rock, Who

²⁵ Trent C. Butler, *Luke*, Holman New Testament Commentary 3 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 371.

²⁶ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1747.

²⁷ David B. Kopel, “Does God Believe in Gun Control?” accessed November 15, 2020, <http://www.davekopel.com/2A/Mags/opreign.htm>.

trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle” (NASB).

Scripture teaches us that we are to prepare and work but trust God for the outcome. Those who trust God should also make adequate provisions for self-defense.

Put Away Your Sword

When the crowd arrived with Judas Iscariot to arrest Jesus, Peter impulsively took matters into his own hands. “And 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. Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword’” (Matt 26:51-52 NASB).

Pacifists often point to this verse as proof that Jesus opposes all forms of violence, including self-defense. That is not at all the point of this passage as MacArthur argued:

Jesus was not speaking about self-defense or the defense of loved ones or friends from an attacker. Nor was he talking about fighting in the armed forces of one’s country. He was referring to violently taking justice into one’s own hands. Under no circumstances does a Christian or anyone else have the right to dispense personal justice, even to defend Christ’s name or Word.²⁸

What did Jesus mean when He told Peter that all who live by the sword would die by the sword? On this, MacArthur observed:

Jesus was not philosophizing by declaring that everyone who takes up arms will himself be killed by arms or that a person who uses violence will be killed violently. His point was that those who commit acts of violence to achieve personal ends will face punishment by civil authorities, **the sword** representing a common means of execution in the ancient world.²⁹

Again, it is essential to look at the context of the passage in question. The primary reason Jesus did not allow the disciples to defend Him was that His arrest and execution were part of God's plan to reconcile the world to himself. In the companion passage in John, Jesus said to Peter, “Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink

²⁸ John MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), location 46705, Kindle Edition.

²⁹ MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, location 46698, emphasis original.

it?” (John 18:11 NASB). For Peter to violently oppose Jesus’ arrest was also to oppose the fulfillment of God’s prophesied plan of redemption. This was not the first time that Christ had to explain to the disciples why He had come to earth (see Matt 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:18–19; 12:40; 17:9, 12).

Second, as Jesus explained to Peter, He did not need a sword for protection. “Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt. 26:53, NASB). A full Roman legion consisted of 6,000 soldiers; therefore, more than twelve legions of angels would have been more than 72,000. Considering that a single angel slew 185,000 men in one night (2 Kgs 19:35), the combined power of 72,000 angels is beyond comprehension. Jesus explained to his impulsive disciple that he had immediate access to supernatural forces that could have easily wiped out the entire Roman army. This little band of 600 foot-soldiers (John 18:13) before them would have been child's play. Peter’s headstrong actions were both unnecessary and absurd.³⁰

Finally, Christ told Peter to put his sword back in its place—that place would be at his side. Jesus did not instruct Peter to get rid of it. Moreover, the fact that at least two of the disciples already had swords suggests that Jesus at least approved of them arming themselves.

Application and Conclusion

The wisdom of the framers of the Constitution in guaranteeing the individual right to bear arms is consistent with the teachings of the Bible and is beneficial for both individuals and the nation as a whole. This is not to say that all Christians should be armed, but we do have a responsibility to protect individual citizens' right to bear arms.

The most comprehensive research on the subject suggests that gun-ownership has a negative effect on crime. John Lott, a senior research scholar at Yale Law School, found that “the greatest declines in crime rates are related to the greatest increases in concealed-handgun

³⁰ MacArthur, *Matthew 24-28*, location 46713, emphasis original.

permits”³¹ and that the carrying of concealed handguns is “the most cost-effective means of reducing crime.”³²

Both “natural” law and the Bible demonstrate that defense of self and others, especially a family member, is not only appropriate but required of godly character. J. P. Moreland and Norman Geisler argued:

To permit murder when one could have prevented it is morally wrong. To allow a rape when one could have hindered it is an evil. To watch an act of cruelty to children without trying to intervene is morally inexcusable. In brief, not resisting evil is an evil of omission, and an evil of omission can be just as evil as an evil of commission. Any man who refuses to protect his wife and children against a violent intruder fails them morally.³³

Christians are commanded to live at peace with all men, as much as it depends on them (Rom 12:18); however, there is also the responsibility to resist evil and defend others. Those who imply or insist that Christians must be pacifistic and have no right to armed defense do not understand the teachings of Scripture. Wayne Grudem reasoned:

There are a number of other passages of Scripture that encourage escaping from danger or even using force in self-defense, if necessary, and encourage us to defend other people against wrongful attacks. Jesus’s disciples carried swords, even after three years of traveling with Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, they had swords. Swords in the first century were used for self-defense. So, I think there are times in which self-defense to prevent us from suffering significant bodily harm is justified.³⁴

Kopel, in a similar fashion, observed:

A 1994 document produced by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace states: “In a world marked by evil and sin, the right of legitimate defense by armed means exists. This right can become a serious duty for those who are responsible for the lives of others, for the common good of the family or of the civil community.” The document notes that “the right” to armed defense “is coupled with the duty to do all possible to reduce to a minimum, and indeed eliminate, the causes of violence.”³⁵

³¹ John R. Lott, *More Guns, Less Crime: Understanding Crime and Gun Control Laws*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 94.

³² Lott, *More Guns, Less Crime*, 160.

³³ J.P. Moreland and Norman Geisler, *The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 135.

³⁴ Wayne Grudem, “A Biblical Argument for Self-Defense,” Crossway, published August 27, 2018, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/a-biblical-argument-for-self-defense/>

³⁵ Kopel, “Does God Believe in Gun Control?”

The bearing of arms in self-defense is not only morally and biblically permissible; it is sometimes obligatory and even supererogatory.

*Honor Code: I have written this paper exclusively for [course number]. If I received any editing or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals

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