

IS THE Best Defense A GOOD BOOK?

Many anti-gun and anti-self-defense activists have long used the Bible to push their pacifist agenda. In truth, the assertion that the New Testament compels pacifism is an extraordinarily weak argument.

by DAVE KOPEL

UCLA LAW PROFESSOR EUGENE VOLOKH has coined the phrase “pacifist-aggressive” to describe people who try to use the force of law to impose their own pacifist beliefs on everyone else. At the heart of the gun control debate in the United States is the pacifist aggression of certain religious officials.

For example, when Congress was considering reforms of the federal Gun Control Act, to stop such Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms acts as telling a gun dealer that a certain action was legal, and then prosecuting him for following the Bureau’s own advice, the Presbyterian Church, USA, sent a representative to testify to the Senate against the reforms. The Presbyterian Church representative declared that his church “has resolved, in the context of gun control, that it is against the killing of anyone, anywhere for any reason.”

The National Coalition to Ban Handguns (later renamed the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence) was, in effect, founded as a subsidiary of the Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church. Methodist publications tell women that they have a duty to submit to a rapist, rather than endanger the rapist by shooting him.

Likewise, Guillermo Chavez, of the Ministry of God’s Human Community of the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, wrote a letter to Jessica Sparks (an attorney who served as editor of the NRA magazine *American Guardian*) in

which Chavez stated that a good Christian could not be a member of the National Rifle Association.

It is an atrocious form of intolerance for some religious groups to attempt to use the force of government to impose their pacifist views on everyone else. Moreover, the assertion that the New Testament compels pacifism is an extraordinarily weak argument.

TO BEGIN WITH, ACCORDING to the New Testament, Jesus personally used violence. When Jesus came to the great temple in Jerusalem, he “found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: And when he had made a scourge of small

cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers’ money and overthrew the table.” (John 2:14-16) A scourge is a type of whip or lash, and is thus a weapon, although not a deadly weapon.

If Christianity required pacifism, then a Christian could not be a soldier.

One of the themes of the New Testament is how the message of Jesus, at first delivered only to the Jews, came to be seen as meant for Gentiles, too. One of the early stories of this transformation is told in the Gospel According to St. Luke. Not long after Jesus began his ministry and called his apostles, a Roman military commander, a centurion, asked for Jesus to come and heal one of the centurion’s servants, saying that he “neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.” (Luke 7:2-10) Slightly rephrased, the centurion’s humble request for healing is repeated by Roman Catholic priests at every mass, during the consecration of the host (the bread and wine).

“When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him [the centurion], and turned

him about, and said unto the people that followed him, ‘I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.’” (Luke 7:9) The Roman centurion is presented as a marvelous example of Christian faith. There is no suggestion that his faith required him to stop soldiering, or that Jesus had any criticism of the centurion’s profession.

One day, some tax collectors (“publicans”) came to Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, asked to be baptized, and said “Master, what shall we do?” Tax collectors were feared and despised by the public, since they tended to extort as much as possible from every taxpayer, send a share to the government and keep the surplus for themselves. John replied to the tax collectors, “Exact no more than that which is appointed to you.” (Luke 3:12-13)

The story suggests that tax collection is (unlike prostitution) not an inherently immoral profession. A person can be a righteous tax collector, as long as he collects only what is properly due, and does not extort extra for himself.

Then, “the soldiers likewise demanded of him [John], saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.” (Luke 3:14)

Alternate translations of the *King James Bible’s* phrase “Do violence to no man” include “Rob no one by violence” (Revised Standard Version); “No bullying” (*New English Bible*); “Don’t use threats or blackmail” (William Beck’s *The New Testament in the Language of Today*); “Molest ye no one” (*The Emphasized New Testament*), “Do not extort money by intimidating” (Berkeley Version); “Put no man in fear” (American Version); or “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation” (English Standard Version).

The King James translation of “Do violence to no man” might, as an isolated phrase, be considered to prohibit soldiering. But the context of the passage—which is made clearer

in the modern translations—is that soldiers (like tax collectors) tended to enrich themselves by abusing the civilian population. The presumption of John’s instruction to the soldiers to “be content with your wages,” was that the soldiers would continue being soldiers—and that they should be content with the military salary—and should not try to make extra income by bullying civilians.

Thus, John the Baptist gave the soldiers the same advice that he gave the tax collectors; in effect, “thou shalt not steal.” “Be content with your wages” would not be advice that could be given to a person whose job was inherently immoral—such as prostitution, manufacturing idols or highway robbery.

After Jesus had died and been resurrected, the apostles debated whether they should preach only to Jews or also to Gentiles. One of the key turning points came when Cornelius, a Roman centurion, had a dream in which a man in bright clothing told Cornelius to send for Peter (the leader of the apostles).

Peter came, even though “it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company or come unto one of another nation.” Peter explained that “God hath shewed me that I should not call any man clean or unclean.” After hearing Cornelius speak, Peter observed that God accepts righteous people “in every nation.” Cornelius was converted, along with two household servants and “a devout soldier” who “waited on him continually.” (Acts 10; 11:1-18)

On Cyprus, Paul preached to Sergius Paulus, the deputy governor (“proconsul”) of the Roman-governed island. While Sergius Paulus was watching, Paul confronted “a certain sorcerer, a false prophet” who was named Bar-jesus. Paul rebuked the sorcerer, and announced “thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness: and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand.”

Proconsul Sergius Paulus, “when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord.” (Acts 13:6-12)

Collectively, the stories of the Roman soldiers—in the days of John the Baptist, during the ministry of Jesus and during the early apostolic period—show that being a good Christian was not at all inconsistent with being a good soldier.

ONE OF THE CORE arguments of Christian pacifism is quotation of various New Testament passages that tell Christians to be peaceful, loving and forgiving. “Turn the other cheek,” is the most famous of these passages. But as the old saying of preachers puts it, “A text without a context is a pretext.”

Consider this text: “If any man come to me [Jesus], and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26) Read in isolation, this text says that a good Christian must hate his family.

But, of course, the vast majority of Christians know better than to read the text without a context. They know that the rest of the Bible repeatedly enjoins husbands and wives to love each other, and insists that children honor their parents. So the discerning reader applies some context to the “hate your family” passage.

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue that at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.” (Matthew 5:38-39)

A slap on the cheek is a very serious insult, not a deadly attack. At the time of Jesus, Jewish law imposed a much larger fine for slapping someone than for simple hitting. (*The Mishnah. Seder Nezekin, Tractate Bava Kamma* (law of damages),

vol. 1(a), ch. 8, sect. 6). Notice that Jesus referred to a slap on the “right cheek.” Such a slap was particularly insulting, because the slap would be delivered with the slapper’s left hand. The left hand was typically used for toilet functions; people ate with their right hands. So the sense of the passage involves a terrible insult, rather than a life-threatening violent attack.

Yet pacifists try to turn “turn the other cheek” into a legal code that reads, “If you or some other innocent person is violently attacked, do not harm the aggressor, even if the aggressor is about to kill the innocent.”

The notion that “turn the other cheek” can be extrapolated into an inflexible rule runs into a very serious problem. Jesus quite obviously did not consider his advice about slapped cheeks to be a mandatory legal code of Christian conduct. In the only story in the Bible in which Jesus was struck on the cheek, Jesus did not meekly turn the other cheek, but instead rebuked the man. After being arrested and brought to the Sanhedrin, Jesus was slapped by a guard. Jesus responded, “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?” (John 18:22-23)

C.S. Lewis’ book *The Weight of Glory* reasoned that “turn the other cheek” is an absolute ban on violence “insofar as the only relevant factors in the case are an injury to me by my neighbor and a desire on my part to retaliate.” However, suggested Lewis, there are implicit exceptions when the issue becomes more than just a person’s desire to retaliate for a past injury. Lewis disputes that Jesus meant “that the best way of bringing up a child was to let it hit its parents whenever it was in a temper or, when it had grabbed the jam, to give it the honey also.” If you are “a magistrate struck by a private person, a parent struck by a child, a teacher by a scholar, a sane man by a lunatic or a soldier by the public enemy, your duties may be very different,” because

there are then “motives other than egoistic retaliation for hitting back.”

FOR MANY CHRISTIAN pacifists, the ultimate example of their theory is the crucifixion: Jesus voluntarily allowed himself to be tortured and killed by the government. Jesus’ non-resistance is used as the ultimate proof that

the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me: And he was numbered with the transgressors. For what is written about me has its fulfillment.”

The apostles responded, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” Jesus said to them, “It is enough.” (Luke 22:35-38, ESV)

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one must never resist evil. The non-resistance argument, when analyzed carefully, falls apart.

Early in Jesus’ ministry, he told the disciples, “I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.” (Luke 10:3-4, English Standard Version)

At the Last Supper, Jesus gave his final instructions to the apostles, and revoked the previous order about not carrying useful items. He asked, “When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?”

“Nothing,” the apostles replied.

Jesus continued: “But now, let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let

Jesus was not setting up a rule that every apostle *must* carry a sword (or a purse or a bag). For the eleven, two swords were “enough.” The broader point being made by Jesus was that the apostles would, after Jesus was gone, have to take care of their own worldly needs to some degree. The moneybag, the knapsack (generally used to carry clothing and food) and the sword (generally used for protection against the robbers who preyed on travelers, including missionaries, in the open country between towns) are all examples of tools used to take care of such needs.

This passage does show that two of the apostles carried swords while they were following Jesus. And rather

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significantly, the disciples may have been violating the sword control laws, as many of the earliest readers of the Book of Luke would have known. Roman law forbade the Jews and other subject people to carry swords. (Edwin R. Goodenough, *The Jurisprudence of the Jewish Courts of Egypt: Legal Administration by the Jews under the Early Roman Empire as Described by Philo Judeaus*, (Union, N.J.: *The Lawbook Exchange*, 2002 [1st ed. 1929], p. 151).

Even if we say that Jesus did not care about whether the apostles actually carried swords, bags or purses, and that Jesus was speaking purely metaphorically, the passage still contradicts the rigid pacifist viewpoint. In the metaphor, the sword, like the purse or the bag, is treated as an ordinary item 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.

Moreover, stripping the passage of all literal content is inappropriate, for Jesus never spoke so cryptically when he was alone with the apostles. Parables were used only when outsiders were present.

A FEW HOURS after the final instructions to the apostles, soldiers arrived to arrest Jesus. Peter, the leader of the disciples, sliced off the ear of one of their officers; Jesus then healed the ear, and said, “No more of this.” (Luke 22:49-51) According to the Book of John, Jesus said, “Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18:10)

In the Book of Matthew, Jesus said, “Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.” (Matthew 26:52) Jesus then rebuked the soldiers for effecting the arrests with clubs and swords, for Jesus was

“not leading a rebellion.”

The most immediate meaning of these passages is that Jesus was preventing interference with God’s plan for the arrest, trial and crucifixion. Additionally, it could be argued that Jesus was instructing the apostles not to begin an armed revolt against the local dictatorship or the Roman imperialists.

Do the passages also suggest a general prohibition against using swords (or other weapons) for defense? The versions of the story recounted in the books of Luke and John do not, but the version in Matthew could be so read. If Matthew is analyzed along the lines of “He who lives by the sword will die by the sword,” the passage is an admonition that a person, such as a gangster, who centers his life on violence will likely perish.

Notice that Jesus told Peter “Put up thy sword into the sheath.” Jesus did not tell Peter to get rid of the sword. Rather, Jesus told Peter to put the sword back in the place where swords are customarily put. As Jesus had instructed at the Last Supper, Peter would *continue* to carry the sword, having been warned by Jesus against the impetuous use of the sword. When Peter put his sword back in its place, Peter was no more disarmed than a man who puts his handgun back into its place (in a holster). (This point is made by Patrick and John Henry, *The Bible and Gun Control*, www.alpinesurvival.com/bibleguncontrol.pdf.)

If the single line in Matthew were to be read to indicate that drawing the sword is always wrong, then it would be impossible to account for the other passages which suggest that a Christian can be a soldier, because a soldier necessarily carries and uses the sword. It would likewise be impossible to account for Jesus’ order at the Last Supper that the apostles carry swords.

Putting the passage from Matthew in the context of the rest of the Bible would, therefore, look to the passage

as a warning against violence as a way of life, rather than as a flat-out ban on defensive violence in all situations.

The immediate context of the passage also clarifies its meaning. After telling Peter to put away the sword, Jesus continued, “Thinkest that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus is must be?” (Matthew 26:52-53)

Jesus did refuse to allow weapons to be used to protect him from torture and execution. The essence of many pacifist arguments is that all Christians are bound to follow Jesus’ example in submitting to unjust death, rather than to engage in violent resistance.

The argument is difficult to sustain. Jesus could have run away from the soldiers, but Jesus chose not to run away. Does Jesus’ choice not to escape by fleeing prove that a Christian should not run away from a wild animal or a person trying to kill him or her? Of course not. Indeed, Jesus advised the apostles that when they were persecuted, they should flee to another town.

Jesus could have prayed for angelic rescue, but he refused to do so. Does Jesus’ choice prove that a Christian cannot pray for a miraculous rescue from peril? Of course not. When Peter was imprisoned by King Herod, who planned to have Peter executed, people prayed for Peter; an angel appeared to Peter in his cell, removed his chains and led him out of prison and to a Christian safe-house. (Acts 12:1-19)

So even though Jesus, on one very unique occasion, chose not to resist by fleeing or praying, there is no generally applicable moral rule that Christians must not use flight or prayer in order to escape death.

Jesus continued to refuse to defend himself when he was brought to trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin and then the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. The Gospels repeatedly show Jesus

humiliating the authorities when he faced them in verbal combat. We have little reason to doubt that Jesus could have out-argued his prosecutors, had he chosen to do so.

If the example of Jesus refusing to save himself through armed resistance is to be taken as a moral imperative for persons in completely different situations, then the example of Jesus refusing legal resistance must likewise be considered equally binding.

Yet in fact, no one claims that accused prisoners should follow the example of Jesus and fail to use the legal process to resist state punishment. When persecuted, Paul twice invoked his legal rights as a Roman citizen. (Acts 22:22-29, 25:6-27) Besides asserting procedural rights, Paul (unlike Jesus) proclaimed his innocence of the substantive charges against him at four separate trials. (Acts 23:3, 24:8, 24:13, 26)

Jesus’ decision *not* to use legal process in order to resist an unjust government was, obviously, not a precedent to be imposed on all believers. Not resisting betrayal, not resisting by fleeing, not violently resisting arrest, not resisting by praying and not resisting prosecution were five ways in which Jesus voluntarily accepted crucifixion. Of these five ways in which Jesus did not resist, there is one—and only one—that pacifists claim to be the normative rule for all Christians. It is illogical to single out Jesus’ decision not to use arms in order to resist an unjust government. Either all of Jesus’ forms of non-resistance are binding examples for Christians, or none of them are.

Only a few hours before Jesus was arrested and he refused armed aid, his last instruction to the disciples was that they should start carrying arms. It seems plain indeed that Jesus was refusing arms in a particular situation, not imposing a rule on mankind. ☪