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Should Christians Be Encouraged to Arm Themselves?



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As chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary, I want to send a different message to our students, and to the readers of Desiring God, than Jerry Falwell, Jr. sent to the students of Liberty University in a campus chapel service on December 4, 2015.

For the sake of the safety of his campus, and in view of terrorist activity, President Falwell encouraged the students to get permits to carry guns. After implying that he had a gun in his back pocket, he said, “I just want to take this opportunity to encourage all of you to get your permit. We offer a free course. And let’s teach them a lesson if they ever show up here.” He [clarified](#) on December 9 that the policy at Liberty now includes permission to carry guns in the dormitories.

Falwell and I exchanged several emails, and he was gracious enough to talk to me on the phone so I could get as much clarity as possible. I want it to be clear that our disagreement is between Christian brothers who are able to express appreciation for each other's ministries person to person.

My main concern in this article is with the appeal to students that stirs them up to have the mindset: *Let's all get guns and teach them a lesson if they come here.* The concern is the forging of a disposition in Christians to use lethal force, not as policemen or soldiers, but as ordinary Christians in relation to harmful adversaries.

The issue is not primarily about when and if a Christian may ever use force in self-defense, or the defense of one's family or friends. There are significant situational ambiguities in the answer to that question. *The issue is about the whole tenor and focus and demeanor and heart-attitude of the Christian life.* Does it accord with the New Testament to encourage the attitude that says, "I have the power to kill you in my pocket, so don't mess with me"? My answer is, No.

Here are nine considerations that lead me to this conclusion.

1. The apostle Paul called Christians not to avenge ourselves, but to leave it to the wrath of God, and instead to return good for evil. And then he said that God gave the sword (the gun) into the hand of governmental rulers to express that wrath in the pursuit of justice in this world.

The movement from [Romans 12:17–21](#), laying out the mindset of the Christian toward his enemies, to [Romans 13:1–4](#), laying out the rights and duties of government, is crucial. God intends to reveal his *justice* in the common grace of police and military ([Romans 13:1–4](#)). And he intends to reveal *the supreme worth of his Son and his salvation* in the special grace of a Christian people who have the miraculous power to entrust themselves to his care while suffering unjustly.

[Romans 12:17–21:](#)

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

[Romans 13:1–4:](#)

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

To be sure there are ambiguities in the way Christian mercy and civic justice intersect. But neither can be absorbed into the other. Any exaltation, or Christianization, of the sword that silences Romans 12:19–20 has lost its way.

For example, any claim that in a democracy the citizens *are* the government, and therefore may assume the role of the sword-bearing ruler in Romans 13, is elevating political extrapolation over biblical revelation. When Paul says, “[The ruler] does not bear the sword in vain” (Romans 13:4), he does not mean that Christian citizens should all carry swords so the enemy doesn't get any bright ideas.

2. The apostle Peter teaches us that Christians will often find themselves in societies where we should expect and accept unjust mistreatment without retaliation.

Before we fire back our objections and exceptions to this truth, let us do our best to hear and embrace and be transformed in our self-protecting hearts by these texts from 1 Peter.

This is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. (2:19)

If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. (2:20)

Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless. (3:9)

If you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. (3:14)

It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. (3:17)

Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. (4:13)

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed. (4:14)

If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (4:16)

Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (4:19)

Few messages are more needed among American Christians today than 1 Peter 4:12: "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Fiery trials are not strange. And the trials in view are hostilities from unbelievers, as the next verse shows: "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:13). These trials are normal. That may not be American experience, but it is biblical truth.

Peter's aim for Christians as "sojourners and exiles" on the earth is not that we put our hope in the self-protecting rights of the second amendment, but in the revelation of Jesus Christ in glory (1 Peter 1:7, 13; 2:11; 4:13; 5:1). His aim is that we suffer well and show that our treasure is in heaven, not in self-preservation.

3. Jesus promised that violent hostility will come; and the whole tenor of his counsel was how to handle it with suffering and testimony, not with armed defense.

"They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. . . . You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives." (Luke 21:12-13, 16-19)

"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28)

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. . . . Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (Matthew 10:16-18; 21-22)

What is the moment of life-threatening danger for? Is it for showing how powerful and preemptive we have been? Is it to show our shrewdness — that we have a gun in our back pocket and we can show

you something? That is a response learned from Jason Bourne, not Jesus and the Bible. That response appeals to everything earthly in us, and requires no miracle of the new birth. It is as common and as easy as eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Jesus says that the moment of life-threatening danger “will be your opportunity to bear witness” ([Luke 21:13](#)). It will be a moment for fearless stepping into heaven ([Matthew 10:28](#)). A moment for enduring to the end and being saved ([Matthew 10:22](#)).

If we teach our students that they should carry guns, and then challenge them, “Let’s teach them a lesson if they ever show up here,” do we really think that when the opportunity to lay down their lives comes, they will do what Jim Elliot and his friends did in Ecuador, and refuse to fire their pistols at their killers, while the spears plunged through their chests?

4. Jesus set the stage for a life of sojourning in this world where we bear witness that this world is not our home, and not our kingdom, by renouncing the establishment or the advancement of our Christian cause with the sword.

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” ([John 18:36](#))

Jesus said to [Peter], “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” ([Matthew 26:52](#))

To be sure, there are many ambiguities about being exiles on this earth with our citizenship in heaven ([Philippians 3:20](#)), while at the same time being called to serve in the structures of society ([1 Peter 2:13](#)). But no book of the Bible wrestles with this more directly than 1 Peter, and the overwhelming thrust of that book is this: As you suffer patiently and even joyfully for your faith, do so much good that people will ask a reason for the hope that is in you ([1 Peter 3:15](#)).

I think I can say with complete confidence that the identification of Christian security with concealed weapons will cause no one to ask a reason for the hope that is in us. They will know perfectly well where our hope is. It’s in our pocket.

5. Jesus strikes the note that the dominant (not the only) way Christians will show the supreme value of

our treasure in heaven is by being so freed from the love of this world and so satisfied with the hope of glory that we are able to love our enemies and not return evil for evil, even as we expect to be wronged in this world.

“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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” ([Matthew 5:38–39](#))

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” ([Matthew 5:44–45](#))

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” ([Matthew 5:11–12](#))

The point of [Matthew 5:11–12](#) is that Christians are freed to rejoice in persecution because our hearts have been so changed that we are more satisfied in the hope of heaven than in the hope of self-defense. This is the root of turning the other cheek and loving the enemy. The steadfast love of the Lord is better than life ([Psalm 63:3](#)). Or as Paul put it, “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” ([Philippians 3:7–8](#)).

Jesus struck the note that the way his disciples demonstrate most forcefully the supreme value of knowing him is by “letting goods and kindred go, this mortal life also,” and calling it “gain” ([Philippians 1:21](#)).

6. The early church, as we see her in Acts, expected and endured persecution without armed resistance, but rather with joyful suffering, prayer, and the word of God.

“Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the

place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. ([Acts 4:29–31](#))

When they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ([Acts 5:40–41](#))

Saul approved of his [Stephen’s] execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. ([Acts 8:1–3](#); see [Acts 9:1–2](#); [12:1–5](#))

In all the dangers Paul faced in the book of Acts, there is not a hint that he ever planned to carry or use a weapon for his defense against his adversaries. He was willing to appeal to the authorities in Philippi ([Acts 16:37](#)) and Jerusalem ([Acts 22:25](#)). But he never used a weapon to defend himself against persecution.

7. When Jesus told the apostles to buy a sword, he was not telling them to use it to escape the very thing he promised they should endure to the death.

[Jesus] said to them, “When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “Nothing.” He said to them, “But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let 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.” And they said, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” And he said to them, “It is enough [that’s plenty].” ([Luke 22:35–38](#))

I do not think that Jesus meant in verse 36 that his disciples were to henceforth be an armed band of preachers ready to use violence to defend themselves from persecution. Jerry Falwell, Jr. said in his clarifying remarks on December 9,

It just boggles my mind that anybody would be against what Jesus told his disciples in [Luke 22:36](#). He told them if they had to sell their coat to buy a sword to do it because he knew danger was coming, and he wanted them to defend themselves.

If that is the correct interpretation of this text, my question is, “Why did none of his disciples in the New Testament ever do that — or commend that?” The probable answer is that Jesus did not mean for them to think in terms of armed defense for the rest of their ministry. Jesus’s abrupt words, at the end of the paragraph, when the disciples produced two swords, were not, “Well, you need to get nine

more.” He said, “It is enough!” or “That’s plenty!” This may well signify that the disciples have given a mistaken literal meaning to a figurative intention. Darrell Bock concludes,

Two events [are] commentary on this verse [36]: Jesus’ rebuke of the use of a sword against the high priest’s servant (22:49–51) and the church’s nonviolent response to persecution in the Book of Acts (4:25–31; 8:1–3; 9:1–2; 12:1–5). In fact, [Acts 4:25–31](#) shows the church armed only with prayer and faith in God. [Luke 22:36](#) sees the sword as only a symbol of preparation for pressure, since Jesus’ rebuke of a literal interpretation (22:38) shows that a symbol is meant (Fitzmyer 1985: 1432; Marshall 1978: 825). It points to readiness and self-sufficiency, not revenge (Nolland 1993b: 1076). ([Luke](#), volume 2, page 1,747)

What seems plain to me is that the uncertainty of this text (which I share) should not be used to silence the others I have cited.

8. A natural instinct is to boil this issue down to the question, “Can I shoot my wife’s assailant?”

My answer is sevenfold.

1) This instinct is understandable. But it seems to me that the New Testament resists this kind of ethical reduction, and does not satisfy our demand for a yes or no on that question. We don’t like this kind of ambiguity, but I can’t escape it. There is, as I have tried to show, a pervasive thrust in the New Testament pushing us toward blessing and doing good to those who hate, curse, and abuse us ([Luke 6:27–28](#)). And there is no direct dealing with the situation of using lethal force to save family and friend, except in regards to police and military. This is remarkable when you think about it, since I cannot help but think this precise situation presented itself, since we read that Saul drug men and women bound to Jerusalem ([Acts 9:1–2](#)).

2) Our primary aim in life is to show that Christ is more precious than life. So when presented with this threat to my wife or daughter or friend, my heart should incline toward doing good in a way that would accomplish this great aim. There are hundreds of variables in every crisis that might affect how that happens.

3) Jesus died to keep that assailant from sinning against my family. That is, Jesus’s personal strategy for overcoming crimes was to overcome sinful inclinations by giving his life to pay debts and change hearts. It is no small thing that Peter based non-retaliatory suffering from unjust treatment on the atoning work of Christ as exemplary: “To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” ([1 Peter 2:21](#)).

4) I realize that even to call the police when threatened — which, in general, it seems right to do in view of [Romans 13:1–4](#) — may come from a heart that is out of step with the mind of Christ. If one’s heart is controlled mainly by fear, or anger, or revenge, that sinful disposition may be expressed by using the police as well as taking up arms yourself.

5) I live in the inner city of Minneapolis, and I would personally counsel a Christian not to have a firearm available for such circumstances.

6) I do not know what I would do before this situation presents itself with all its innumerable variations of factors. And I would be very slow to condemn a person who chose differently from me.

7) Back to the first point, it seems to me that the New Testament does not aim to make this clear for us. Its aim is a radically transformed heart that lives with its treasure in another world, longs to show Jesus to be more satisfying than life, trusts in the help of God in every situation, and desires the salvation of our enemies.

9. Even though the Lord ordains for us to use ordinary means of providing for life (work to earn; plant and harvest; take food, drink, sleep, and medicine; save for future needs; provide governments with police and military forces for society), nevertheless, the unique calling of the church is to live in such reliance on heavenly protection and heavenly reward that the world will ask about our *hope* (1 Peter 3:15), not about the ingenuity of our armed defenses.

God is our refuge and strength. ([Psalm 46:1](#))

My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ([Philippians 4:19](#))

“You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish.” ([Luke 21:17–18](#))

Once more let me say that God ordains the use of the sword by the state in upholding justice ([1 Peter 2:13–17](#); [Romans 13:1–4](#)). Therefore, this article is not a position paper on governmental policy regarding ISIS. Nor is it about the policies of how police should be enlisted to protect private institutions.

This article is about the people whom the Bible calls “refugees and exiles” on earth; namely, Christians. It’s about the fact that our weapons are not material, but spiritual ([2 Corinthians 10:4](#)). It is an argument that the overwhelming focus and thrust of the New Testament is that Christians are sent

into the world — religious and nonreligious — “as lambs in the midst of wolves” ([Luke 10:3](#)). And that exhorting the lambs to carry concealed weapons with which to shoot the wolves does not advance the countercultural, self-sacrificing, soul-saving cause of Christ.