

CHURCH *of* GOD

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CHRISTIANS AND SELF-DEFENSE

Study Paper

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We live in a violent world, and such has been the case from the very beginning as recorded in the book of Genesis. While this fact is not new, it nonetheless acknowledges that Christians could face the threat of violence in the course of their lives.

How should a Christian respond to the threat of violence? Does the Bible allow for the use of deadly force to defend oneself?

In answering these questions, it is important to let God's Word—not human reasoning—instruct us as to what Christ would expect of a Christian.

Spiritual vs. carnal understanding

The Bible reveals that there are two general spiritual categories of people in the world: (1) the true, converted Christians or “firstfruits” of God's plan, and (2) the remainder, the unconverted world.

At the present time—in this “present evil world”—God is in a New Covenant relationship with only those few people whom He is preparing to become sons and daughters in His eternal family at Jesus Christ's return. Only those who have been given this special calling, who have responded to that call and who have been given the gift of God's Holy Spirit are in the New Covenant relationship with God. They are the firstfruits that comprise the Church of God (James 1:18).

As a result, God expects His people to *think differently* from the natural way humans think. We see this clearly in His Word.

Answers to questions about self-defense are to be found in the will of God, which is expressed in the Word of God and understood in a New Covenant context.

God wants His people to change the way they think! He desires them to grow in the ability to think in a new, different and Christlike way (Philippians 2:2-5). The converted Christians will then have the ability to spiritually understand and obey God's instructions through the power of the Holy Spirit, which God gives to them (1 Corinthians 2:9-16). This understanding that God gives to His people is in contrast with the deceived nature and focus of the rest of the world (1 John 5:19-20; 1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 4:22-24).

Human reasoning tells us that it is logical and reasonable to use whatever force is necessary to defend ourselves in a physical confrontation. In fact, many would prepare for such a possibility by carrying a weapon. But should we base our decisions and behavior on what is natural to us or on what we've believed in the past?

Consider what Jesus taught in what is called the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). The Beatitudes that are referred to in Matthew 5 are clearly counterintuitive to human reasoning. How can the meek inherit the earth, or how can those who are persecuted receive the Kingdom of God? Not even the commonly accepted understanding of Old Testament teachings of His time met Christ's standards for what He expected of His followers. How many times in Matthew 5 do we find the phrase “you have heard that it was said” followed by “but I say”? That new and different approach to His teachings about Christian behavior and thinking continues through chapters 6 and 7.

Christ's comments in verses 38 and 39 of Matthew 5 speak to the subject of this paper: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."

What are we to do with this instruction from Christ? This example in verses 38 and 39 clearly describes a violent intent, and the natural human reaction would be, understandably, to respond in kind. Christ knew that when He stated it. Yet that is not what He taught. Jesus was talking about a different mind-set—a different focus.

Christians understand that this approach can only come as a result of *a new way of thinking* that is made possible through the receiving of God's Holy Spirit. By letting Christ live in us (Colossians 1:26-27), we can trust in Him and have a mind that understands, believes and obeys the revealed will of God. It is this mind and this way of thinking that led Jesus to fulfill His Father's will even when it involved suffering. It is this way of thinking that *trusts* in God. It is the mind of *faith*. Such a mind is developed in God's elect *through the power of the Holy Spirit of God*. And having God's Holy Spirit should lead to choices in our behavior and response that are *very different from the natural way humans think*—and very different from what is common in Satan's world.

The biblical instructions

What did Jesus Christ and His apostles say about self-defense, the use of deadly force and killing? What does the spiritual law of God show us in the context of the New Covenant? Let's begin by considering a number of verses from the Bible that speak to the issue of violence, evil, fighting and taking a person's life:

Exodus 20:13: "You shall not murder."

Matthew 5:38-39, 43-44: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you *not to resist an evil person*. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, *turn the other to him also*. ... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, *love your enemies*, bless those who curse you, *do good to those who hate you*, and *pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you*."

Matthew 10:16: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be *wise as serpents and harmless as doves*."

John 18:36: "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. *If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight*, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; *but now My kingdom is not from here*.'"

Matthew 26:50-53: "Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and took Him. And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. But Jesus said to him, '*Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword*. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?'"

Romans 12:17-21: "*Repay no one evil for evil*. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, *do not*

avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

It is clear that from the beginning of God's dealing with His people, He did not intend for man to decide for himself to take the life of another human being. That instruction is embedded within the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:13).

Later, we find in the Sermon on the Mount (recorded in Matthew 5, 6 and 7) that Jesus taught that persecution and difficulties will be a part of a Christian's life. Yet it is *how* we respond to those challenges that is important to God. This is what Christ wanted His disciples to see and understand. He wanted them to respond in a way that is clearly different from the natural, carnal response of the unconverted mind.

We clearly see in the following scriptures that God wants His people to place their faith in Him for protection.

Psalm 146:5: "Happy is he who has *the God of Jacob for his help*, whose hope is in the LORD his God."

Matthew 5:10-12: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Jeremiah 17:5, 7: "Thus says the LORD: '*Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength*, whose heart departs from the LORD. ... Blessed is the man who *trusts in the LORD*, and whose hope is the LORD."

2 Corinthians 10:3-5: "For though we walk in the flesh, *we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal* but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, *casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."*

1 Thessalonians 5:15: "*See that no one renders evil for evil* to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all."

What do we conclude?

From these scriptures, we conclude that a Christian should trust in God and not use violence and deadly force in responding to evil people with criminal intentions. God expects the Christian to remove himself or herself from situations that might result in conflict and to trust Him for deliverance and protection. A Christian should pray for God's protection, even in the moment of peril.

He or she should trust God to do according to His righteous will in all circumstances. The Christian can be confident that God can miraculously protect His people, as the biblical record plainly shows.

The Christian should exercise wisdom by avoiding potentially violent circumstances as best he can. This would be an example of being “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” and avoiding the tendency to “tempt” God (Matthew 10:16; 4:7). As Christ Himself did on a number of occasions, Christians should remove themselves from circumstances that threaten to turn violent.

Thus, we see that the intentional use of violence to cause bodily harm to another person—whether by use of a firearm or other weapon or not—is not consistent with the teachings of God’s Word.

We do not find any biblical support in the teachings of Christ or the apostles that would justify a Christian’s choosing to fight with the intent to harm or kill if he or she is attacked. However, what we do find is an admonition to trust God, knowing that “vengeance” is God’s (Romans 12:19) and that He promises to protect us (Psalms 121:7-8; 138:7).

Questions that arise

Some may ask, “Do Christians expect to live a life that is not touched by violence?” If Christians are not to use lethal force or weapons to protect themselves or their loved ones from violent, evil people, are they totally without physical protection in this ‘present evil world’?”

Others may ask, “Yes, but what about those servants of God who did use injurious force and who did engage in violence—including warfare—as recorded in the Bible? What about men who, we are told, will be in the Kingdom of God, part of the first resurrection? Chief among these men is David, but there are others—Joshua, Samson and even Abraham (Genesis 14:14-15), who was the father of the faithful. What about those men? How are we to understand that they received God’s favor (at least on some occasions) when they practiced the ‘righteous’ use of violence and godly ‘vengeance’?”

In regard to the first of these two questions, the Bible shows that God *has* made some provision for the peace and protection of people in this world, *including Christians*. As noted earlier, this world consists of only a small number of Christians (those converted members of the Church of God) while the rest of humanity is unconverted. While God has made salvation available only to His firstfruits now, He will make it possible for the rest of the world to enter into a New Covenant relationship with Him through Christ at a later time in His plan. For now, the unconverted of this world are not in that relationship.

God is also working with His Church in a manner that is different from His relationship with the rest of the world. Within the Church, the ordained ministry of Jesus Christ fulfills a specific role in teaching and nurturing the body of the Church. Yet Scripture shows there are other servants or “ministers” whom God allows in the world to aid in keeping the peace and protecting the general public (Romans 13:1-5; 1 Peter 2:14).

God’s Word shows that He gives governments in the world the responsibility of maintaining law and order and establishing judicial systems. They are responsible for providing basic peace, order and freedom from the chaos and fear that would be even worse if violent, evil men had no restraints on them. By living in this world, Christians, along with everyone else, receive a level of protection from such violence or harm by these institutions that are allowed by God.

Of course, this level of peace or protection may vary greatly from country to country—as corruption within policing authorities is often the rule in some parts of the world. But even though these human governments may be corrupt, inefficient and unjust, they are ordered and allowed by God (Romans 13:1-7). Thus, a Christian can not only receive basic protection, but should submit to such authority so long as such submission does not involve disobedience to God (1 Peter 2:13-17; Acts 5:28-29).

God's allowance with ancient Israel

As to the question of those servants of God who did engage in violence or warfare, it should be noted that no human being other than Jesus Christ has ever served God perfectly, without any moral or spiritual failings. The fact that a converted servant of God—even one recorded in the Bible—engaged in a certain behavior at some point in his or her life does not mean that such behavior was pleasing to God. For example, God did not allow King David to build the temple (which he greatly desired to build) due to his use of violence and shedding of blood (1 Chronicles 22:5-9).

Additionally, Jesus explained that God made certain allowances in times past (in the time of the Old Covenant prior to Jesus' incarnation) with the nation of Israel—due to the hardness of the human heart.

For example consider what Jesus said about divorce. When Jesus defended the sanctity of marriage by saying, "What God has joined together, let not man separate," the Pharisees asked, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" Jesus answered, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:6-8).

Yet another example to consider is Israel's desire for their own king (1 Samuel 8). When Israel asked for a king, God told Samuel that "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them" (verse 7). And we find that some years later, God actually selected David to be their king. Yet this action by God doesn't change the fact that *His intent* was for Israel to be governed as a theocracy, according to God's leadership and the priesthood.

The same can be said of warfare and killing. God's intent was made clear in Exodus. As they entered the Promised Land, we see that God intended the Israelites to trust in Him to "drive out the Canaanite" before them (Exodus 23:2) rather than trusting in themselves or an army for their defense. The fact that God allowed Israel to have an army to which He gave victory didn't change God's intent to fight for Israel.

Because of the hardness of their hearts and their unbelief, God allowed the Israelites to fight most of their own battles. But from the beginning, Scripture indicates He had intended to fight for them. Through the years, there were many dramatic examples of God intervening for His people. He knocked down the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6), and He caused the entire Syrian army to hear noises that frightened them into running for their lives without a fight (2 Kings 7:6-7).

But most times Israel chose to trust mainly in themselves. Once they chose to fight for themselves, they rarely turned back.

As Israel approached the Promised Land, they heard reports of giants in the land and strong, fortified cities. Rather than remembering that God had fought for them and destroyed the Egyptian army, they thought of how impossible it would be for Israel to win in battle. They decided to rebel against God and return to Egypt (Numbers 14:1-4). When, too late, they changed their minds and decided to stage an invasion of the Promised Land, Moses warned them, “You shall fall by the sword; because you have turned away from the LORD, the LORD will not be with you” (Numbers 14:43).

So Israel’s legacy was one of fighting their own battles rather than relying on God to do the fighting and secure the Promised Land for them. Either way, it was God’s plan to remove the sinful Canaanites and give the land to Israel. If they had allowed God to do their fighting for them, they could have received the inheritance without the loss of some of their young sons in battle.

It is important to remember that the nation of Israel was an Old Covenant nation. Even after they refused to obey or put total trust in God, at times He did allow them to win or lose under their own power, and at other times He granted miraculous victories with little or no military effort. Either way, this doesn’t set a precedent for Christians today under the New Covenant. There is no scriptural support in the New Testament for Christians to bear arms with the intent of taking someone’s life in self-defense or in protecting one’s property. Unlike ancient Israel, the New Testament Church represents another way of thinking. The Church understands that Christ’s Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).

Relying upon God

Now let’s take note of servants of God who obeyed, believed and trusted in God. Such trust includes understanding and acknowledging that God does not always choose to deliver His faithful servants from suffering and violence—even when they have done no wrong.

This understanding of the mind and intent of God is relevant to the central question being addressed in this paper: If a Christian is committed to not using deadly force or weapons to ward off evil men who would harm him or his family, doesn’t that leave the Christian susceptible to suffering at the hands of evil men?

Yes, it does. Let’s consider this example in the book of Exodus:

Exodus 14:13-14: “And Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.’”

Here we find the children of Israel fleeing Egypt with Pharaoh’s army on their trail. Some among the group, fearing the onslaught of the Egyptian army, wailed about being left to die in the wilderness. Yet what did Moses tell them to do? Did he tell them to take up what instruments they had and fight back? No, he did not. While there were far more Israelites than there were men or chariots in Pharaoh’s army, God’s servant, nonetheless, told them to rely upon God for their protection.

In the book of Daniel, we find another example of God's servants being faced with a life or death choice relating to their faith in Him to protect them:

Daniel 3:15-18: “Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?’ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.’”

Of course, the option of fighting back was not realistic for these three men. Still, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were willing to trust God with their lives. They were confident in God's ultimate deliverance. They looked in faith to God for protection, regardless of whether He would fulfill their desire and hope for immediate deliverance before or when they were thrown into the fiery furnace. Trusting in God should not stop at the door of potential suffering! Such an approach reflects the mind of Christ.

Trusting God includes the capacity to say, believe and mean, “Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, King James Version). This is an example of the trust and faith only made possible with God's Holy Spirit.

Can Christians defend themselves?

This brings us to the central question of this paper: Can Christians use force to ward off an attacker or protect themselves or a loved one?

The answer is “yes, they can”—but under what circumstances might this occur and how or why would a Christian engage in such a struggle?

Let us consider the example of Jesus Christ first. We know that while Christ certainly did use force when overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13), He did not use force against the money changers themselves. We find in John 10:39 that Christ sought to escape those who were trying to seize and hurt Him, rather than attack them and fight back. In Revelation 12 we see the Church of God had to flee to escape persecution and will have to do so in the future. From these examples, it is plain that in the case of serious trouble or threat—*fleeing* is often the wisest course of action.

However, fleeing is not always an option. In circumstances where we need to protect a loved one, it is sometimes necessary to risk one's own life instead. As Christ did for the Church, we should be willing to do the same for our wife, children or brethren if that becomes necessary (1 John 3:16).

This does not mean we should be looking for trouble or meddling in the affairs of others or their fights. The Bible shows us that we should avoid such entanglements: “He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears” (Proverbs 26:17). If we enter into quarrels, we will suffer the consequences of them.

An attack against members of God's Church is rare, but it can and will happen (certainly in the future prophesied tribulation). In such a hypothetical case, how far can a Christian go in using force to save himself or a loved one and still stay within his convictions and faith (as described above)?

As God's people, we should know that the all-powerful Creator can protect His people from harm! We also know that God has, on rare occasions, allowed some of His servants to suffer persecution and even violent death (note the examples listed in Hebrews 11:36-38).

So what if one is attacked and flight is not an option and efforts to reason with the assailant fail? What should a Christian do? Should a Christian do nothing, taking the punishment and possible death without doing anything?

Without question, the very first thing a Christian should do is pray. In a very quick and urgent prayer, one should beseech God for His divine, supernatural protection and guidance. We look to God to protect us during such circumstances.

In addition, the Christian should make every effort to contact the authorities and police if circumstances allow.

But if the attacker pursues, trying to harm a loved one, the Christian should strive to come between them to save the family member. Yet even in such circumstances, the mind-set of the Christian is to protect himself and his loved one. This is a mind-set of defense and avoidance, not a mind-set, desire and plan to do violence, maim or even kill another individual.

It is not wrong to use restraining force to protect oneself, a family member or a brother in the faith. It is not wrong to restrain such an assailant and prevent him (if it is possible) from doing harm to you or the one you are striving to protect. Yet such force should not be *premeditated* or done in hatred with an *intent* to injure or kill the other person.

Summary

It requires faith to be a Christian in this present evil world. It also requires true humility to yield to God's instructions and decisions—especially on those occasions when He allows His people to endure trials or suffer for righteousness' sake (while practicing righteousness, rather than being guided by mere human reasoning and emotions). Thankfully in modern times there have been relatively few occasions when members of the Church of God have fallen victim to criminal violence. But we must realistically acknowledge that those things can happen.

Even so, the Word of God clearly shows that the Christian should, first and foremost, place his trust in God as his protector and deliverer. Our relationship with God and faith in His promises should be the first line of defense for any Christian who might experience such an encounter, not the use of deadly force or violence. God's Word makes it clear that vengeance belongs to Him—the One in whom Christians should trust (Psalm 46:1).

If confronted with such a situation as we have been considering in this paper, a Christian should flee if at all possible. If fleeing is not an option, the use of defensive, nonlethal force (i.e., restraint of the perpetrator) is within the scope of a proper Christian response. Nothing in the scriptures that

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we have considered would preclude that option. However, the teaching from God's Word confirms that Christians should not possess weapons for the intended purpose of using them to cause harm to another human being, as doing so would contradict our faith in God for protection and not reflect the mind of Jesus Christ.

Above all, Christians should pray regularly for God's protection and guidance. And if such a situation should present itself, we, as God's people, should ask Him in faith for deliverance, according to His perfect, loving and sovereign will, and in a way that will bring glory to God. A prayer offered in faith and in the name of Christ—entreating God for His deliverance and divine protection even at such a moment—shows God the Father that the Christian is committing his cause and that of his family and loved ones to God in trust and humility.