

Christians and Self-Defense against Criminals—Including the State (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the first installment of a two-part series dealing with Christians and self-defense.

Do Christians have a right of self-defense? If so, under what circumstances may they defend themselves? May they only defend themselves against criminals or against civil authorities too? Are there any instances in which Christians must *not* defend themselves? These are tough questions that require more than just knee-jerk or cavalier responses. Indeed, a lot is riding on the doctrine of self-defense. For instance, if self-defense against other human beings were not justified under any circumstances, then women with tubal pregnancies would have to perish with their unborn children (on account of bleeding from a ruptured fallopian tube), criminals would have free course over the goods that believers have “stored up” (Proverbs 13:22; Ecclesiastes 11:1; Matthew 25:16-21), and revolution would always be wrong.

If self-defense is wrong then we ought all to be anarchists. I do not mean “anarchy” in the sense of *chaos* but rather in its scientific sense of a civilization without any central and organized civil government. The dictionary defines anarchy as: “Absence of any form of political authority.” The fundamental reason why government exists ultimately rests on the conviction that self-defense is right. Pure pacifists neither need nor want a government. They are apolitical and should be, logically, anarchists. Why then are Christians not anarchists? Only if the Bible supports the doctrine of self-defense would the principle of Christians using limited government for purposes of creating a common defense be justified.

In the same vein we may ask: “Why do Americans have (or even want) a political authority?” According to the doctrine of Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence*, “Governments are established among Men” to secure our rights of life, liberty, and property. The *Constitution* sets forth the role of civil government as well: “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” The third article of the (sadly) forgotten *Articles of Confederation* states: “The said States hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretense whatever.”

In other words, in the most fundamental sense, the Founders wanted a government (but not a *state*) in order to protect them from predators. Politically, Americans covenanted together for a “common defense” because at some level self-defense is not practicable. Civil government becomes an extension of our right of self-defense and our desire for self-preservation. Nevertheless, regardless of what American political philosophy may have been, should those who adhere to biblical Christianity adopt it today?

Several New Testament passages can be used to support the doctrine of self-defense for a Christian. First, John the Baptist did not condemn soldiers for doing their job, part of which included killing people, but only warned against abusing their office. “Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, ‘And what shall we do?’ So he said to them, ‘Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages’” (Luke 3:14). Second, Christ directed that Christians take up arms useful in self-defense: “he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a knapsack; and he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one” (Luke 22:36).

Third, the Apostle Paul implies that Christian men ought to defend their families as part of their provision: “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” (1 Timothy 5:8). Note that Moses was not condemned for killing an Egyptian while defending one of his brethren (Acts 7:24, 28). Finally, although we cannot generate any conclusive argument from silence, it is notable—taking the preceding passages into account—that Christ did not condemn prudent planning for (and use of) warfare as a proper function of a

wise king (Luke 14:31). Moreover, there are plenty of examples in the Old Testament of God condoning warfare and men going to battle. And God does not change, even if the administration of His kingdom does.

Clearly there is a sense in which Christians are to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), suffer, and show forth the glory of God in doing so rather than defending themselves. There is a time in which we must suffer and die (Matthew 5:11; Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 2:3). Nevertheless, the New Testament does not indicate that Christians are called upon to be the world's doormats. Thus, in the current administration of God's kingdom, there seems to be room for Christians to pursue liberty and at times defend themselves against tyranny. In the final analysis, Christians can bring glory to God either by suffering or through promoting liberty.

Christians and Self-Defense against Criminals—Including the State (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the second installment of a two-part series dealing with Christians and self-defense.

In his famous work *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer commended Christian suffering under tyranny and oppression as a means of demonstrating Christian faith and commitment. "It would be equally wrong to suppose that St Paul imagines that the fulfillment of our secular calling is itself the living of the Christian life. No, his real meaning is that to renounce rebellion and revolution is the most appropriate way of expressing our conviction that the Christian hope is not set on this world, but on Christ and his kingdom. And so—let the slave remain a slave! It is not reform that the world needs, for it is already ripe for destruction. And so—let the slave remain a slave! [Christ took on the form of a slave too (Philippians 2:7)]....The Christian must not be drawn to the bearers of high office: his calling is to stay below" (1995, Touchstone, p. 260). Is Bonhoeffer right? Should American Christians *not* run for "high office"? Should they be content with their "slavery" imposed upon them by a tyrannical state that confiscates more than half of their earnings in taxes, proactively regulates their behavior as a big brother would, and maintains a threat against their homes for nonpayment of property taxes?

If self-defense by Christians is biblical, why didn't Christ and the Apostles defend themselves against the Roman state? Well, Christ had to die for the sake of His church. He said that He could have had "more than twelve legions of angels" (Matthew 26:53) to defend Him, but He chose not to defend Himself out of love for His people. (Note too that He never said that defending Himself would have been wrong.) Earlier in His earthly ministry, Christ divinely avoided His persecutors since "His hour had not yet come" (John 7:30) and He warned Christians to "flee" coming persecutions and the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 10:23; 24:16; Luke 21:21). Fleeing is a form of self-preservation, which is a subset of self-defense.

Likewise, the Apostle Paul defended himself in court (Acts 22:1 [Jews]; 26:1ff [Festus]) and Paul went so far as to hope that Alexander the Coppersmith would be temporally castigated by God (2 Timothy 4:14), perhaps to further his self-preservation. Paul also instructs that those who are enslaved should take the opportunity to become free if they can do so: "Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it" (1 Corinthians 7:21). Therefore, I believe Bonhoeffer, although well-intentioned, was mistaken. Christians should try to be free from slavery and tyranny whenever possible. If God opens the door, freedom might allow them to bring greater glory to God in their lives than would come from demonstrating their piety and service while living under oppression. It could be that the Apostles and early disciples were just being expedient in not taking up arms. Just because a Christian has a right to defend himself does not mean that he should always do so. The early Christians had little hope of overpowering the brutal Romans.

Let's reason through when it is appropriate for Christians to forcibly resist tyrants and predators—even with deadly force. Consider: (1) an angry Christian brother attacking you with a knife; (2) an armed

robber or other predator who enters your home in the middle of the night; (3) the local mafia organization that wants to shake you down for monthly contributions; (4) a criminal in public (e.g., as you pass by a small group of thugs who are gang raping a woman outside of a bar, they turn their attention towards you in a menacing way); (5) the invading army of another nation; (6) the invading army of a nation that your people just declared their independence from (but they refuse to acknowledge your independence from them, e.g. England in 1776); and (7) your own state which is extorting money from people “legally” and in other ways has become a predator—maybe even violating God’s law.

In my view, Christians may properly resist in *any* of the above cases. The logic is incontrovertible. The fact that the predator in case #7 was elected by the people makes no difference. It also makes no difference that representative government is producing tyranny. We would not condone abortion or slavery just because elected state leaders sanction it. If state leaders behave as criminals then they become exposed to being justly killed by those who choose to defend themselves. The Founders agreed with this premise and thus approved the Second Amendment to ensure that citizens could defend themselves against the state. Killing thugs, repulsing criminals, and resisting tyrants (and states) are potentially appropriate activities for a Christian—depending on the circumstances. Yes, the American “Revolution” was just.

Sadly, many Christians today have muddled thinking and have forsaken the ideals of the Founders and the premises of the New Testament. They wrongly support the predatory, proactive state. Instead, Christians should work against their enemy the *state* and its proactive policies. While many Christians think that self-defense against the state is *always* an unwelcome distraction from their primary mission, there are times when the purposes of Christians in the world can be served through self-defense. Therefore, I argue that Christians should defend themselves against the state, just as they would against any other criminal or crime organization. At the same time, Christians can and should support a limited *government*, established to protect them from predators and thus indirectly benefit the church and its primary mission.