

Self-Defense: The Bible and Christian Tradition

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A Command and a Caveat

If possible,
so far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all.

Rom 12:18

“Love for the powerless
cannot be separated from
the struggle against power.”

Stephen Charles Mott

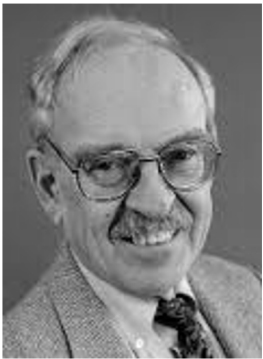
In the News...

- Gun Sales Spike After 12 Killed in Colorado Movie Theater
- Gun Sales Soar After President Obama's Re-Election
- After Obama win, U.S. backs new U.N. arms treaty talks

What is Pacifism?

- opposition to war, usually on moral or religious grounds (but sometimes on practical grounds)
- opposition to all killing and violence
- opposition to only certain kinds of war (nuclear)
- Mennonites, Quakers, St. Augustine (personal), Dwight Moody, John Howard Yoder, Ronald J. Sider

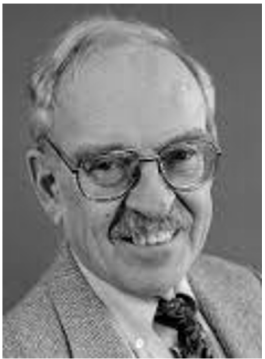
Pacifist Christianity



Ronald J. Sider

- “In both actions and words Jesus rejected lethal violence.”
- “In the final crisis, Jesus persisted in his rejection of the sword.... Not even the defensive sword should be used.”
- “Fighting – even defensive violence to prevent the most unjust arrest in human history – belongs to the old sinful order.”

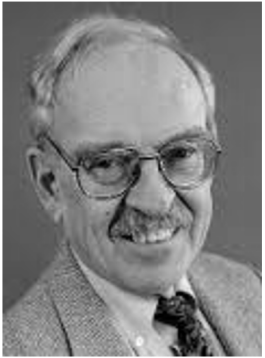
Pacifist Christianity



Ronald J. Sider

- Matthew 5:38-48
- “One should even submit to further damage and suffering rather than exact equal pain or loss from the unfair, guilty aggressor. In no way should we allow the other person’s response to govern our action.”

Pacifist Christianity



Ronald J. Sider

- “When one engages in lethal violence, one cannot lovingly appeal to the other person as a free moral agent responsible to God to choose to repent and change.”

The Bible & Self-Defense

1. Old Testament
2. New Testament
3. Theological Tradition

**not dealing with “just war” or “civil disobedience”

1. Old Testament

- **Exod. 20:13**
 - ESV - “You shall not murder.”
 - KJV – “Thou shalt not kill” misleading
 - The Hebrew term used here (*r̄ṣḥ*) is...specific to putting to death improperly, for selfish reasons rather than with authorization. (NAC)
 - no unauthorized “private” person or group has the right to end a human life (NAC)
- **Gen 9:6** makes it obvious this isn't absolute

1. Old Testament

- Exod. 22:2-3a
 - If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him.
 - day-night differentiation

1. Old Testament

- Exod. 22:2-3a
- why the day-night differentiation?
 1. assumption that a person with legitimate business around your house will do it during the day
 2. defending one's person and property at night means one cannot be as certain if the intruder is armed or not

1. Old Testament

- Exod. 22:2-3a
- why the day-night differentiation?
 3. a person awakened by an intruder will likely feel more vulnerable and cannot be expected to react with the same rationality as one wide awake.
 4. easier to call for help during the day

Ashbrook Statesmanship Thesis, 2008

“One breaking into a home during the day is likely a thief who does not expect the family to be there. Therefore, it is unlikely such an individual intends to injure anyone. One breaking into a home at night, however, poses a different threat, for he likely expects the family to be asleep at home.



Ashbrook Statesmanship Thesis, 2008

“The intentions of such an individual are much more difficult to discern, and consequently the Bible permits an individual to kill those who break into his home at night, in defense of himself and the members of his family.



Ashbrook Statesmanship Thesis, 2008



“This passage goes a long way in legitimizing the act of killing in self-defense, even when it is unclear whether or not one’s life has been attacked.”

Jonathan Spelman, *The Morality of Killing in Self-Defense: A Christian Perspective*

1. Old Testament (Just War)

- Genesis 14
 - “So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abraham’s brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way.”

1. Old Testament (Just War)

- Genesis 14
 - “When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.”

1. Old Testament (Unjust War)

- Genesis 34
- Dinah & Shechem
 - “On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males....The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister.”

1. Old Testament (Unjust War)

- Genesis 34 (Gen. 49:5-7)
 - Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.

1. Old Testament (Self-Defense)

- Neh. 4

- But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry.



1. Old Testament (Self-Defense)

- Neh. 4

- And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.



1. Old Testament (Self-Defense)

- Neh. 4

- From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail....each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built....each kept his weapon at his right hand.



1. Old Testament (Self-Defense)

- Esther 8:11
 - “the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods.”

1. Old Testament (Summary)



- condemns unjust killing
- prohibits disproportionate response
- sanctions just wars against aggressors
- allows for self-defense
- proportionality & intention

2. New Testament

- Matt. 5:38-39

- 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.

1. is it always wrong to resist evil?

2. what does it mean to turn the other cheek?

2. New Testament

- Matt. 5:38-39

1. is it always wrong to resist evil?

- Sider concedes: “Jesus’ own actions demonstrate that he did not intend to forbid all forms of resistance. Jesus constantly opposed evil persons in a forthright, vigorous fashion.”

- examples: Matthew 23; John 18:22-23

2. New Testament

- Matt. 5:38-39

1. is it always wrong to resist evil?

- Eph. 6:13 - Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

2. New Testament

- Matt. 5:38-39
- lex talionis – law of retaliation
- Romans 12:17-19 – 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.”

2. New Testament

- Matt. 5:38-39

2. What does it mean to “turn the other cheek”?

- “Striking a person on the right cheek suggests a backhanded slap from a typically right-handed aggressor and was a characteristic Jewish form of insult” (NAC)
- not a physical assault or threat on one’s life

2. New Testament

- Matt. 5:38-39

2. What does it mean to “turn the other cheek”?

- “There is a difference between insult and assault. Nor does the parable of the Good Samaritan teach, by extrapolation, that the Samaritan was good because he waited until *after* the victim was mugged and robbed to assist him.” (Charles & Demy, 369)

2. New Testament

- Matt. 5:38-39

2. What does it mean to “turn the other cheek”?

- 1 Pet. 2:2 - while being reviled, He did not revile in return
- 1 Pet. 3:8-9 - be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead;

2. New Testament

- Matt. 5:38-39

2. What does it mean to “turn the other cheek”?

- when Jesus was unjustly struck in the face, he rebuked his attacker (John 18:23)
- when Paul was unjustly struck, he also rebuked his aggressor (Acts 23:3)
- Jesus didn't tell us to turn the cheek of our neighbor (fail to defend others)

Is the New Testament Pacifist?

- “Love your enemies...” (Luke 6:35)
- “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” (Matt. 26:52)
- “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.” (John 18:36)

Is the New Testament Pacifist?

1. Jesus reserves his highest praise for a centurion.
 - “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.” (Matt. 8:10)
2. John the Baptist instructed soldiers:
 - “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” (Luke 3:14)
 - notice what he didn’t say

Is the New Testament Pacifist?

3. The most visible Gentile convert was a centurion (Acts 10)

- “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.”

4. Hebrews 11 celebrates warriors:

- “who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice...escaped the edge of the sword...became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.”

Is the New Testament Pacifist?

5. Jesus didn't tell Peter to get rid of his sword but to "put it back into its place."
 - What was Peter doing with a sword if Jesus was a pacifist? (Matt. 26:52)
6. Immediately before his arrest, Jesus instructed his disciples to buy a sword if they didn't have one (Luke 22:35-38)

Is the New Testament Pacifist?

7. Jesus used force to cleanse the Temple
 - John 2:13-17
8. On numerous occasions, Jesus escaped attempts on his life
 - Luke 4:29-30; John 8:59; John 10:39
9. On numerous occasions, Paul escaped attempts on his life
 - Acts 9:23-25; Acts 22:25; Acts 23:16-35

Is the New Testament Pacifist?

10. John 18:36

- “While Jesus is clearly, in this passage, forbidding the church as an institution to use physical force in its discipline or defense, He clearly states here that an earthly kingdom can and should fight when necessary.”
 - Robert Morey, *When is it Right to Fight* (40)

3. Theological Tradition



Thomas Aquinas
1225-1274

- the amount of force that one uses to defend against an attacker must not be out of proportion to the threat posed by the attacker.
- self-defense prohibited unless one's failure to do so will result in his death.
- individuals need not be so afraid of killing attackers that they fail to protect themselves.

3. Theological Tradition

“Suppose a Mad-man, or a Lunatick, or one that mistakes me for some other Person who is his Enemy, should make an Attempt on my Life, I may justifiably use my Right of Self-Defence;



Samuel von Pufendorf
1632-1694

3. Theological Tradition

“for the Person from whom the Attempt comes, whereby my Life is hazarded, hath no Right to attack me, and I am by no means obliged to suffer Death unnecessarily; on which account it is altogether unreasonable that I should prefer his Safety to my own.”



Samuel von Pufendorf
1632-1694

3. Theological Tradition

“He who, being able to be the peaceful owner of something—for example, life— aggresses against somebody else's life in such a way that the person aggressed against cannot defend himself without depriving the aggressor of his life, operates in such a way as to endanger his own life.”



Antonio Rosmini
1797-1855

3. Theological Tradition

“We can say that this aggressor throws his life away himself, and that he expressly surrenders his holy property. Thus he who takes the life of the unjust aggressor as the only way to save his own, takes that life with the express consent of the owner.”



Antonio Rosmini
1797-1855

Self-Defense and Moral Culpability



“Love toward oneself remains a fundamental principle of morality. Therefore it is legitimate to insist on respect for one's own right to life. Someone who defends his life is not guilty of murder even if he is forced to deal his aggressor a lethal blow:

- (RCC Catechism, 1996)

Self-Defense and Moral Culpability



“If a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful: whereas if he repels force with moderation, his defense will be lawful.”

- (RCC Catechism, 1996)

Self-Defense and Moral Culpability



“Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others. The defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm.”

- (RCC Catechism, 1996)

Self-Defense and Moral Culpability



- when an aggressor is killed by someone acting in self-defense, the moral blame lies with the aggressor, not the defendant.

Self-Defense and Moral Culpability

“To be very practical: the Christian boy or girl should take a hit or two on the school playground in Christian grace, meekness, gentleness, love, and forgiveness, without feeling the necessity of avenging himself.



Self-Defense and Moral Culpability

“But when that does not bring peace and cessation of the blows, then it becomes no longer possible to live at peace with that attacker, and the Christian may defend himself or herself if aid from an authority figure to stop the fight is not available.



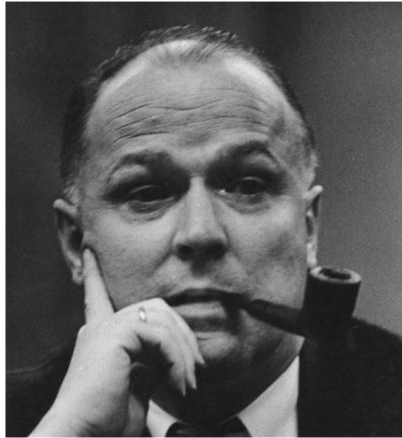
Self-Defense and Moral Culpability

“The same applies to the adult Christian when his physical life or that of others is endangered.”

- George W. Knight III
Readings in Christian Ethics, 499



Self-Defense and Moral Culpability



Paul Ramsey
1913-1988

“A Christian does whatever love requires, and the possibility cannot be ruled out that on occasion defending himself may be a duty he owes to others. Whenever sacrificing himself, or in any degree failing to protect himself and his own, actually would involve greater burdens or injury to others, surely then a Christian should stick to his post whether he wants to or not.”

Self-Defense and Moral Culpability

- a private individual may kill in self-defense only when
 - 1) he has been attacked or threatened
 - 2) the use of lethal force is necessary to protect his life
 - 3) his action is motivated by his love of those who rely upon him.

Self-Defense and Moral Culpability

“The gravity of the taking of human life cannot be overstated. The Christian will never take human life, the Christian will be nonviolent – unless the requirements of love in the situation *demand* otherwise.”

Stephen Charles Mott