



# Does God Believe in Gun Control?

By [David B. Kopel](#)

"You are doing God's work," Brady Bill sponsor Charles Schumer remarked to Sarah Brady at one Congressional hearing. And perhaps one could argue that if it took God seven days to make the world, people shouldn't be able to buy a gun in any less time.

But did God really endorse the Brady Bill? One would certainly think so, given the huge number of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religious organizations that endorsed the Brady Bill, and which endorse virtually every other gun control proposal. God's anti-gun army is prominent not just in Washington, but also in the state legislatures.

This year, for example, as legislatures have debated laws allowing licensed, trained citizens to obtain a permit to carry a handgun for protection, some of the most vocal opponents have been religious groups. Now the state chapter of the National Council of Churches does not show up at legislative hearings armed with criminological data. Instead, persons claiming to testify on behalf of "the religious community" come to express their "moral" opposition to the use of deadly force against criminal attack.

This same worldview is at the heart of the federal ban on so-called "assault weapons," which attempts to distinguish good "sporting" firearms from bad "antipersonnel" weapons. It likewise motivates the stated long-term agenda of Sarah Brady's organization Handgun Control, Inc.--to outlaw firearms possession for self-defense. Within the gun control movement, one does not have to dig very far to find the strongly-held and sanctimonious belief that the NRA and its ilk are moral cretins because they believe in answering violence with violence.

But is hostility to the lawful use of force for defense the only morally legitimate position? The moral authorities relied on by most Americans suggest otherwise. The Book of Exodus specifically absolves a homeowner who kills a burglar. (Exodus 22:2, "If the thief is caught while breaking in, and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguiltiness on his account.")

The Sixth Commandment "Thou shalt not kill" refers to murder only, and does not prohibit the taking of life under any circumstances; notably, the law of Sinai specifically requires capital punishment for a large number of offenses.

A bit earlier in the Bible, Abram, the father of the Hebrew nation, learns that his nephew Lot has been taken captive. Abram (later to be renamed "Abraham" by God) immediately calls out his trained servants, set out on a rescue mission, finds his nephew's captors, attacks, and routs them, thereby rescuing Lot. (Genesis 14). The resort to violence to rescue an innocent captive is presented as the morally appropriate choice.

Most gun prohibitionists who look to the Bible for support do not cite specific interdictions of weapons (there are none) but instead point to the general passages about peace and love, such as "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes 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" (Matthew 5: 43); and "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." (Romans 12: 17). None of these exhortations take place in the context of an imminent threat to life. A slap on the cheek is a blow to pride, but not a threat to life.

Reverend Anthony Winfield, author of *Self-Defense and the Bible*, suggests that these verses command the faithful not to seek revenge for evil acts, and not to bear grudges against persons who have done them wrong. He points to the passage "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live in peace with everyone" (Romans 12: 18), as showing an awareness that in extreme situations, it might not be possible to live in peace.

Further evidence that the New Testament does not command universal pacifism is found in the missions of John the Baptist and Peter, both of whom preached to soldiers who converted. Neither John nor Peter

demanded that the soldiers lay down their arms, or find another job. (Luke 3: 14; Acts 10: 22-48). John did tell the soldiers "Don't extort money, and don't accuse people falsely," just as he told tax collectors "Don't collect any more than you are required to." The plain implication is that being a soldier (or a tax collector) is not itself wrong, so long as the inherent power is not used for selfish purposes.

Of course most gun prohibitionists do not see anything wrong with soldiers carrying weapons and killing people if necessary. But if--as the New Testament strongly implies--it is possible to be a good soldier and a good Christian, then it is impossible to claim that the Gospel *a/ways* forbids the use of violence, no matter what the purpose. The stories of the soldiers support Winfield's thesis that the general "peace and love" passages are not blanket prohibitions on the use of force in all circumstances.

Is an approving attitude towards the bearing of arms confined to professional soldiers? Not at all. At the last supper, Jesus' final instructions to the apostles begin: "When I sent you without purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," the apostles answer. Jesus continues: "But now, if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one." He ends by observing "what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment." The apostles then announce, "Lord, behold, here are two swords," and Jesus cuts them off: "That is enough." (Luke 22: 36-38).

Even if the passage is read with absolute literalness, 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." More importantly, Jesus may not have been issuing an actual command that anybody carry swords, or purses, or bags. The broader, metaphorical 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 purse (generally used for money), the bag (generally used for 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. When the apostles took Jesus literally, and started showing him their swords, Jesus, frustrated that they missed the metaphor, ended the discussion. The metaphorical interpretation is supported by scholarly analysis, and seems to best account for the entire conversation.

Even when reduced to metaphor, however, 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, any more than Jesus would have created metaphors suggesting that people carry Ba'al statues for protection, or that they metaphorically rape, rob, and murder.

A few hours after the final instructions to the apostles, when soldiers arrived to arrest Jesus, and Peter sliced off the ear of one of their leaders, Jesus healed the ear. He then said "No more of this" (Luke 22: 49-51) or "Put your sword away" (John 18: 10) or "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26: 52). (The quotation is sometimes rendered as "He who lives by the sword will die by the sword.") 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 and trial. Additionally, Jesus was instructing the apostles not to begin an armed revolt against the local dictatorship or the Roman imperialists. Jesus had already refused the Zealots' urging to lead a war of national liberation.

Do the passages also suggest a general prohibition against drawing swords (or other weapons) for defense? The versions of the story recounted in 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 who centers his life on violence (such as a gang member) will likely perish. On the other hand, a translation of "all who draw the sword will die by the sword" could be read as a general rule against armed violence in any situation.

The best way to understand the Bible, most theologians would concur, is not to look at passages in isolation, but instead to carefully study passages in the context of the rest of the Bible. If the single line in Matthew were to be read to indicate that to draw the sword is always wrong, then it would be difficult to account for the other passages which suggest that drawing a sword as a soldier (or carrying a sword as an apostle) is not illegitimate.

Looking at the passage of 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. A 1994 document produced by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace states:

"In a world marked by evil and sin, the right of legitimate defense by armed means exists. This right can become a serious duty for those who are responsible for the lives of others, for the common good of the family or of the civil community." The document notes that "the right" to armed defense "is coupled with the duty to do all possible to reduce to a minimum, and indeed eliminate, the causes of violence."

The Catholic Church recognizes people as saints because (among other reasons), the lives of saints are considered to worthy of study and emulation. February 27 is the feast day of Saint Gabriel Possenti. According to *The One Year Book of Saints*, as a young man in 19th-century Italy, Francesco Possenti was known as the best dresser in town, as a "superb horseman," and as "an excellent marksman." The young man was also a consummate partygoer, who was engaged to two women at the same time. Twice during school he had fallen desperately ill, promised to give his life to God if he recovered, and then forgotten his promise. One day at church, Possenti saw a banner of Mary. He felt that her eyes looked directly at him, and he heard the words "Keep your promise." Possenti immediately joined an order of monks, taking the name Brother Gabriel.

The main incident for which Saint Gabriel Possenti is remembered was this: "One a summer day a little over a hundred years ago, a slim figure in a black cassock [Possenti] stood facing a gang of mercenaries in a small town in Piedmont, Italy. He had just disarmed one of the soldiers who was attacking a young girl, had faced the rest of the band fearlessly, then drove them all out of the village at the point of a gun.... [W]hen Garibaldi's mercenaries swept down through Italy ravaging villages, Brother Gabriel showed the kind of man he was by confronting them, astonishing them with his marksmanship, and saving the small village where his monastery was located."

Saint Gabriel Possenti's "astonishing marksmanship" was displayed after he had just disarmed the soldier. The mercenaries' leader told Possenti that it would take more than just one monk with a handgun to make the mercenaries leave town. The saint pointed out to the mercenaries a lizard which was running across the road. Possenti shot the lizard right through the head, at which point the mercenaries decided that discretion was the better part of valor; they obeyed Possenti's orders to extinguish the fires they had started and to return the property they had stolen. They then fled the village, never to be heard from again.

Jewish law comes to the same conclusion as the Vatican Pontifical Council: "If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first," commands the Talmud. Bystanders are likewise required to kill persons who are attempting rape. As Columbia University's George Fletcher explains, while there is a duty to self-defense, the duty to defend others is seen as prior.

The view that forcible resistance to evil attack is itself evil has serious implications: Patrick Henry and the other founding fathers were wrong to urge armed resistance to the British Redcoats; the Jews who led the Warsaw Ghetto revolt against Hitler were immoral; Jeffrey Dahmer's victims would have been wrong to use a weapon to protect themselves; Saint Gabriel Possenti was a paragon of evil; Abraham should not have rescued his kidnapped nephew; and police officers who fire their guns to protect innocent people are sinful.

Consider the situation of a mother in a rough Los Angeles neighborhood, moments after an escaped psychopathic murderer has broken into her house. The woman has good reason to fear that the intruder is about to slaughter her three children. If she does not shoot him with her .38 special, the children will be dead before the police will arrive. Is the woman's moral obligation to murmur "violence engenders violence," and keep her handgun in the drawer while her children die? Or is the mother's moral *duty* to save her children, and shoot the intruder?

The view that life is a gift from God, and that permitting the wanton destruction of one's own life (or the life of a person under one's care) amounts to hubris is hardly new. As a 1747 sermon in Philadelphia put it: "He that suffers his life to be taken from him by one that hath no authority for that purpose, when he might preserve it by defense, incurs the Guilt of self murder since God hath enjoined him to seek the continuance of his life, and Nature itself teaches every creature to defend itself."

Whatever their disagreements on other matters, the natural rights philosophers such as Blackstone, Montesquieu, Hobbes, and Locke who provided the intellectual foundation of the American Revolution saw self-defense as "the primary law of nature," from which many other legal principles could be deduced.

As the great Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis wrote: "We shall have lost something vital and beyond price on the day when the state denies us the right to resort to force..."

Leading 19th-century criminal law scholars emphasized a less philosophical, point: that victims protect the entire community when they kill a dangerous criminal rather than leaving him free to prey on others. As

Frederick Pollock summarized the views of James Bishop and of Sir James Stephens, "Sudden and strong resistance to unrighteous attack is not merely a thing to be tolerated ...as a necessary evil [but is] a just and perfect" right. A good citizen attacked has "a moral duty" to use all force necessary to apprehend or otherwise incapacitate criminals rather than to submit or retreat.

Janet Powell, speaking for Australia's Anti-Gun Lobby, Incorporated, insists that a person should never use a gun for self-defense, because of duty to the community. But what kind of decent community would prefer that an innocent member of the community be harmed instead of the harm being suffered by a conscious predator?

John Crook, the head of Gun Control Australia, stated that any woman who would defend herself with a firearm is "selfish." But a *Psychology Today* study of "Good Samaritans" who came to aid of victims of violent crime found that 81% "own guns and some carry them in their cars. They are familiar with violence, feel competent to handle it, and don't believe they will be hurt if they get involved." Are these people selfish, inferior beings?

Having been through the Bible several times, I still can't find the parts where God (or even a minor prophet) endorses a handgun waiting period, one-gun-a-month, or any other item in the litany of the anti-gun lobbies and the religious groups that endorse them. (Nor, of course, is there anything in the Bible implying that there is anything immoral with any of these proposals.)

But the idea that pacifism in the face of violent attack against one's family or oneself is some kind of moral imperative that should be enforced by the state is not only missing, it is contrary to common sense and the Western religious tradition. Making it illegal for citizens to own firearms for defense of home and family may or may not be a good idea from a criminological viewpoint--but it is certainly not God's work.

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