

January 10, 2016

The National Presbyterian Church

## Probing Questions: "Is Self Defense Christian?"

Matthew 5:38-48, Romans 13:1-5, 12:9; 1 Peter 2:20-24

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In our sermons in the first 6 weeks of 2016 we're looking at issues have been in the news in the past year, and that don't seem to be going away anytime soon. The context for today's message on self-defense is clearly the matter of gun violence, whether in our inner city streets, shootings in our homes and institutions, or in response to terrorists. But before I begin -- I need to make some caveats

The first has to do with **time** – with 20 minutes! There's no way to address these issues fully in this limited time; so my only intent is to touch the tip of the iceberg, provide a few points of departure that I trust you'll continue to pursue, afterwards, and preferably with others. Whether you agree or disagree with what I say.

The second has to do with **timing**. I know it looks fishy: . . . the fact that I'm speaking on self-defense during this particular week when the President and the leading Republican candidate have spoken on gun violence, BUT what I want to remind you of (as done before) is that the topics and timetable for the sermon series have been in the works for some months—and this is pure luck/providence . . . good or bad (as the case may be), that this happens to be the topic for today. Let me be clear – The sermon is NOT a response (yay or nay) to either the President or to Mr. Trump!! . . .

In fact – let me state it clearly, also, from the outset: it is NOT my intention to speak about *political policy or legislation* at all. The Bible does *not* do this – it does not tell us how to legislate . . . so I'm not going to do that! But what the Bible *does do* (on the positive side) is give us principles that are to inform and influence our thinking not just about *religious* Life, but about *all of* life . . . including political life. And this is what I want to do. What I want to leave you with are a number of principles and passages from Scripture that I hope you will take with you when you leave, and that will inform and transform your thinking not only about this issue but about life, both as citizens of our nation and as those who also happen to be Christians.

SO let's think about these principles. I want to begin by thinking about what I'll call 'allegiances'

### **1. PRIMARY ALLEGIANCES**

In any discussion of ethics and morality we need to ask especially about our primary allegiance, our primary source of authority: Who Do I belong to, *first*? Who do I listen to *most*? Who has the right to control my agenda?

- a. For us as Christians, of course, Our primary allegiance is or should be to God made known in Jesus Christ – which means that it is NOT first to our nation as citizens or even to our families.

- Jesus said: *You shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.* — Matthew 22:37-38.
- b. And when asked about the his primary community allegiance Jesus was very clear that it was neither to his nation or to his nuclear family, but to the family of Christ (the church).
- Jesus asked: *“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* Matthew 12:48-50

## **2. MULTIPLE ALLEGIANCES**

- a. Being clear on the priority of our allegiances is really important because in reality, this side of heaven, we cannot escape actually belong to multiple communities, and thus we have multiple allegiances, each having some kind of claim on our lives.

This is important and it is normal – but it leads to great confusion from which there is no escape.

We are not Amish, who seek to live with only one or two sets of allegiances (church and family). Rather, as Christians we belong not only to the church, and our families, but also to the state, and sometimes to our businesses. And even within our families the allegiances can be multiple and complicated (think of the multi-generational allegiances we have: to spouse, and to children and to parents, leaving us often feeling squashed in the middle).

In fact, Jesus opens the door to these multiple allegiances when he tells us that we are not only to love God, but to *“love your neighbor as yourself” – the second greatest commandment.* Mathew 22:39.

- And he adds that we’re not to be too picky about who our neighbors are. Think of Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan where a religious leader asks Jesus, *“And who is my neighbor?”*(Luke 10); and Jesus responds by pointing to a hated Samaritan.
- b. So, with regard to the State, in obedience to God, and as lovers of our neighbors -- Christians are to play our part, wherever possible, as citizens of whatever state God places us in, yet without ever allowing the state to claim or make a claim on us that it can act like God!
- The prophet Jeremiah (29:7) said: *“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*
  - Or think of the biblical stories of Joseph, Daniel, Esther and Nehemiah (each of them serving in leadership within pagan nations)
  - In fact, the Apostle Paul, also living in a pagan world – within the empire of Rome, still reminded Christians that they had an obligation to the State: *Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment . . . if you do wrong, be afraid, for (the ruler) 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.* (Romans 13:1–4)

### **3. MORAL AMBIGUITY, INTERPRETATION AND MULTIPLE ALLEGIANCES**

- a. So here we are, caught in the middle of competing allegiances. Which is all well and good, except that it inevitably leads to moral ambiguity and unanswered questions. And Jesus himself is not much help: when he spoke about church and state, he gave no clear interpretation to his words: “*Give to Caesar (that is, the emperor or the state) what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s.*” Matthew 22:21.
- b. **Part of the ambiguity lies in the fact that the overlapping realms we belong to not only have ideals and values that non-Christians and Christians hold in common, but also ones on which we differ significantly.**
  - i. Even when we agree in content, there sometimes remains difference in interpretation. For example, Christians share with much of the secular world a common goal to pursue. Think, for example, of both justice (the message of the prophets) and liberty (the message of the Exodus).

In the secular world, political parties tend to agree that these principles are good, but also tend to differ on the understanding and application or priority of these principles. Sometimes there are hard choices between equally important principles. And even among Christians the application of Biblical principles can be understood differently.

    - For example, the Bible speaks clearly about concern for the poor. I’ve just finished reading biographies by Speaker Paul Ryan and Senator Elizabeth Warren. They both care passionately about the poor. But they by no means agree on the best ways for government to demonstrate that care.
    - Or . . . The Bible clearly speaks, about “*an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*” (Exodus 21:24), but people outside and inside the church differ on its meaning:
      - is this a law urging people to get maximum justice (Go for the eye! Go for the tooth!)
      - or is it actually a law designed to limit vengeance in a lawless and violent age (that is, don’t ever seek from the law more than you lost – no greed, no vengeance; proportional justice at the most).These are two interpretations reflect two quite different approaches to the same principle – and to life!!
  - ii. In addition, ambiguity arises in the lives of Christians living in a secular state, because there are principles that govern *our lives as Christians and as a Church or family*, that *others outside the Christian faith*, including both individuals and the state, (1) may not only disagree with, but (2) ones which they simply cannot understand or have room for in their thinking. For example . . .

### **4. SPECIFICALLY CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATIONS**

- a. **At the center of our faith is person whose example is our model of life: the Crucified and Resurrected Jesus Christ.**

To hold up such a hero to the secular world is either seen as ‘non-sense’ or as irrelevant (this is not new. See 1 Corinthians 1:18). But for us as Christians . . . this model we’ve been given in Jesus determines the course of our lives!! That is, as Christians, we look at Jesus’ death and see it as enormously significant; for secular persons, Jesus’ death is of little interest.

- **Not only did Jesus' death** accomplish r salvation as an atonement for sin  
**But his death and prior suffering** also gave us an example to follow: Jesus chose not to defend himself when arrested, tortured and crucified. The early Christians found their behavior profoundly challenged by this part of Jesus' life:

1 Peter (2:20-24) says: *If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.* "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

*When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

Not only is Jesus' death central to the shaping of our moral life as Christians (when it's irrelevant to the secular world) **so too is Jesus' resurrection.**

- **Jesus' resurrection** means that *this life* is not all there is. My death and yours, especially as an act of self-sacrifice does not end our existence. Death is no longer the ultimate enemy, to be feared most. We believe that there is more to come. And that even our death can be a profound witness to others for God.

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

Jesus said (in Matthew 16:24-26): "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit us if we gain the whole world and forfeit our soul?"

The Apostle Paul said (in 1 Corinthians 15:54) "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

And in Philippians 1:21 he adds – "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain"

None of this makes sense in a secular world. But for those of us whose primary allegiance is to God and to his church, it should radically change our lives, and the life of the church.

- b. In addition to Jesus' example, **at the center of our faith is Jesus and his teaching – which we believe not merely as good advice, but as 'the word of God' to us. For example,**
- Jesus' resurrection not only showed that an after-life (heaven) exists, but Jesus taught his followers to pray that earth becomes as much like heaven as possible:  
*Pray like this, said Jesus: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* Mathew 6:10
  - So what does this mean or look like – earth becoming like heaven? Well, heaven is most clearly described in Revelation 21, and in Isaiah 2 and 11.  
In Isaiah 2:4, for example, we are told – *God shall provide justice for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*  
And in Isaiah 11:6,8,9 we read – *The wolf shall live with the lamb . . . The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand*

*on the adder's den. 9They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.*

At the least, this means that the Christian ideal for society is not to create safety by filling the earth with weapons, but to create safety by creating as many spaces and communities as possible where no weapons are necessary at all. The church, our primary community, is to be one of those spaces or communities.

**To be sure, the heavenly ideal, may not become fully realized before Christ returns, but it sets the direction to be pursued by Christians in every sphere of allegiance we belong to . . . even if, in a world in which evil is real, we cannot quite get there.**

- So Jesus taught us to pray for heaven to invade earth, but **Jesus also taught us that we are to expect trouble in the world**; that being a Christian would be hard. And YET wherever possible, we are to love both our neighbors and our enemies, and not to resist evil.
  - *“Love your neighbor as yourself”* (Matthew 22:39)
  - *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”* Mathew 5:44
  - You have heard it said, *“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, **do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strike you on the cheek, turn the other also”*** Matthew 5:38-39.

**And, speaking about the difficulty of the Christian life, Jesus adds this strange challenge to his followers:**

- *“When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “No, not a thing. He said to them, “But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one.”* Luke 22: 35-36

Buy a sword? Jesus telling his disciples to buy a sword?” Dos Jesus mean it? Literally? Some of Jesus’ disciples (as was often the case) thought so. So, when Jesus was arrested Simon Peter pulled out a sword to defend Jesus – BUT Jesus very clearly told him to stop it! Put the sword away:

*When those who were around him saw (the armed people coming to arrest Jesus), they asked, “Lord, should we strike with the sword?” Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, “No more of this!”* (Luke 22:49-51).

In early December Jerry Falwell, Jr. president of Liberty University, used these verses to defend his words about students arming themselves on campus. The best response to Falwell that I have read is by an equally conservative pastor, Dr. John Piper, who – with me — clearly understands Jesus here to be figurative, not literal. We are in the middle of a spiritual battle, *Jesus is saying. Following him will not be easy. Get ready! And as usual: Simon Peter doesn’t get it! And many Christians these days, don’t seem to either!!*

See Dr. John Piper, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/should-christians-be-encouraged-to-arm-themselves>

## **5. IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY and THOUGHT**

In Christian history and thought, the balance between the clear teaching of Jesus, and the moral ambiguity that comes when we live in different realms of allegiance has played out differently.

If the world were simple – if we lived like the Amish in a world with only a few allegiances, and if we were fully isolated from evil -- then maybe our response would be clear: no self-defense, no retaliation, no vengeance. You may remember that when evil entered the Amish world ten years ago with a mass shooting in Lancaster County . . . the Amish responded in precisely this way: with amazing grace and forgiveness, a powerful witness to a secular world, like the witness of the church last year in Charleston.

**But for most us, Ambiguity and Multiple Allegiances is the world we live in:**

The Apostle Paul, admonishes Christians in the church in Rome to model the life and teaching of Jesus, but then immediately adds his belief that the state (even the “evil Roman empire”) had the right to use force:

- *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them; Do not repay evil for evil. Beloved never avenge yourselves.* (Romans 12:14, 17,19)
- *Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain.* (Romans 13:1–4)
- And on another occasion, Paul used the force of Roman Law to protect himself from harm (Acts 16:37).

In the first three centuries, Christians, who were generally not part of civil government, echo Jesus non-violent example and teaching in the Bible in all circumstances: they were generally pacifists on all fronts. But by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the realities and ambiguities of multiple allegiances became part of mainline Christian thought. Christians became leaders in the secular world – and found themselves caught between how life ought to be lived in the church and in the State

**Paul Ramsey**, the late Princeton ethicist, tells about this period like this:

. . . the primitive pacifism generally practiced by early Christians so long as they were in a minority gave way to what were judged as more effective means for assuming responsibility for the whole of organized society. Although decades before their time, individual Christians had begun to accept service in the Roman legions, often with the explicit approval of church authorities.

St. Ambrose (A.D. 340-396) and his great convert, St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) were the first to give fully elaborated theoretical defense of Christian participation in armed conflict . . . It would be a great mistake to regard Christianity’s accommodation to Constantine’s empire as necessarily a compromise of its genius or a “fall” from the pristine purity of its ethic. As a matter of fact, careful examination of the literary (sources indicates that) the general strategy of Christian love continued without abatement and without any alteration in its fundamental nature. Both St. Ambrose and St. Augustine continued to teach that when a man himself alone is concerned, he ought never to resist “one who is evil.”

“A Christian Ethic of Resistance.” *The Essential Paul Ramsey*, p. 49.

In other words, when it comes to dropping our defenses – can we do it for ourselves? Well, maybe yes. But with regard to others? – ahh, love may be the very thing that drives us to resist, and sometimes with violence.

**John Knox** (Union Seminary scholar, not the the Scottish Reformer!) wrote about this same distinction between personal self-protection and the necessary Christian protection of others:

Jesus said, “if any man smite you on the cheek turn the other also”. Here the situation is relatively simple – you and your enemy.

But Jesus did not say: “If any man smite one of your friends, lead him to another friend that he may smite him also.” Not only is it clear that Jesus could have made no such statement, but also that he would have felt that the involvement of the interests of others (that is, others besides one’s self and one’s enemy) transformed the whole moral situation and placed our obligations with respect to it in a radically different light.” (in Ramsey, p. 48).

**Martin Luther** permitted self-defense only on some occasions (Luther, Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed”, Works, Muhlenberg, 3:249-50).

And the Westminster Larger Catechism (part of our Presbyterian constitution) affirms self defense, as a part of a sustained program to preserve and promote life. The answer to question 135 is:

The duties required in the sixth commandment (you shall not murder) are: . . . *all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and **avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defense thereof against violence, patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit; a sober use of meat, drink, physic, sleep, labor, and recreations; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behavior; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; **comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.*****

## **6. SO WHAT ABOUT US?**

Love of God and love of neighbor can play out in different ways in different spheres of life, but our allegiance to God and to Jesus’ example and teaching and about this life and the life to come must never be out of our minds.

So there’s a time to be like Todd Beamer: DO SOMETHING:

Todd Beamer was a Sunday School teacher, graduate of Wheaton College, who was on Flight 93, on September 11, 2001. With a dozen others he decided to resist the hijackers and to take the plane back from them if possible. Doing nothing was not an option. They read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, said the Lord’s Prayer, and then he said “Let’s roll.” Because of their actions the plane crashed -- almost certainly saving the White House or the U.S. Capitol from destruction.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Todd\\_Beamer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Todd_Beamer)

Or, on the other hand, think about some missionaries in Ecuador who died 60 years ago this past Friday. **THEY DID NOTHING WHATEVER TO DEFEND THEMSELVES.** Daniel Southern, former Billy Graham Crusade Director, wrote this (personal correspondence) on Friday,

I am an avid outdoorsman and gun enthusiast as well as a patriotic American. Today I remember **Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, Pete Fleming, and Nate Saint. These men were 5 missionaries who became Christian martyrs, 60 years ago today**, after making contact with the Wao-dani Indians (also known as

Auca) of Ecuador. Waodani culture relied heavily on an eye-for-an eye justice. Conflicts and disagreements were often dealt with through spearing one another to death - a vicious cycle that always invited further retaliation to the point where everyone seemed to have a just reason to kill someone else. More than anything, Jim and the others wanted to introduce the Waodani to the ways of Jesus of Nazareth. When they finally made contact with the Waodani, the first few days went well. But their excitement was short lived, as on the sixth day they realized some of the Wao-dani were preparing to spear them to death. because one of the women lied and told the rest of the tribe she had been raped by the white men. Jim Elliot had a gun in his pocket, but he refused to use it against them even in self-defense because showing them what Jesus was like was a far higher priority than living-- so the five men kept the promise they had made to each other: they would not use their guns if the Waodani decided to kill them. And so, Jim, Ed, Roger, Pete, and Nate, were speared to death on that day. Their wives continued reaching out to the Waodani, who eventually wondered what message of love was so important that these men were willing to die -- but not to kill. Many of the Waodani became Jesus followers, and to this day they are a peaceful tribe-- in large part due to the love and sacrifice of these five men and their families.

**Or Closer To Home, Think Of Antoinette Tuff** a school receptionist in Decatur, in August 2013, Georgia when a white 20-year-old gunman stormed in with an AK-47 assault rifle and 500 rounds of ammunition. While on the phone with police, Tuff calmed the gunman down. More than 800 students and 100 employees were at the school that day; not one was injured. But she did nothing in self-defense. She writes:

Well you know, one thing God says,. He says 'love thy neighbor.' To me, I saw someone that was hurting, and did not need me to judge or pass judgment on them, show anger or be frustrated or mad at him. But I saw a young man in an unstable condition mind needing me to show him love.

All of us have a purpose in our life. And so God prepares us all for one. That day was very important for me that every word that proceeded out of my mouth at that point in time could be life or death, not only for me and Michael Hill [the gunman], but for everyone in that building. And so I knew that that was the moment that I had to make sure that everything that I heard God say to me, was what I came out of my mouth with.

“Prepared for a Purpose”; <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/31/268417580/how-one-womans-faith-stopped-a-school-shooting>

May God guide us in this and all things as we seek to follow the one whom God vindicated through the resurrection – even Jesus our Lord, who did not defend himself, but died for us freely.

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