

Gun Violence, Sin, and Regulation

A Teaching for the Church

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- Gun violence has become a public health issue in the United States unparalleled in any other democratic, industrialized nation. This is not just about politics; it is a moral issue.
- Jesus calls his disciples to deny themselves and follow in his footsteps which are steps of mercy, peace, and reconciliation
- Christianity asserts that each human person is created in the image of God and therefore sacred, beautiful, beloved of God, and of infinite value. But we are also all caught in the interrelated web of Sin.
- Seeking to be faithful to Jesus' way of peace and recognizing the radical reality of Sin that affects us all, the Church tradition has insisted that the use of weapons be restricted to those officially authorized to do so
- Knowing our own sinful tendencies and unruly passions, Christians are right to distrust ourselves with weapons designed to kill other human beings
- Regardless of laws and regulations, Christians are called to a life of peace, witnessing to the hope of resurrection.
- There is room, even within an open interpretation of the Second Amendment, to advocate for more effective gun safety measures for the sake of the welfare of society.

Introduction

Gun violence has become a public health issue in the United States unparalleled in any other democratic, industrialized nation. This is not just about politics; it is a moral issue. We are regularly shocked, if no longer surprised by mass murders. Gun violence in our cities and elsewhere has become so common as to hardly make the news. Guns are now the leading cause of death for American children. They are a common cause of fatal accidents in homes and a common means of suicide. Sadly, the list goes on and on.

The Anglican Tradition has not been a pacifist tradition. It has allowed that, under certain circumstances, "It is lawful for Christian men [and women], at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars" (Articles of Religion XXXVII). This has been the majority position of most of the Christian Church generally for most of its history. But it is also the case, even with that, that there is in the Church's teaching a deep ambivalence about the use of violence, the passions in the human heart that lead to violence, and the passions that violence enflames.

Scripture

The Church's ambivalence about violence is rooted in the life and teaching of Jesus and the witness of the New Testament.

The Birth Narratives that we remember every Christmas serve as a prologue and summary of the Gospel. In Luke 1:78-79, Zechariah prophesies of Jesus that he will "guide our feet into the way of peace." When the angels appear to the shepherds proclaiming glad tidings of great joy at the coming of a savior, they sing of peace on earth as part of what salvation is about (Luke 2:14). At his death on the cross, Jesus prayed forgiveness for his killers and those who taunted him as he hung dying (Luke 23:34).

Between the bookends of his birth and death, Jesus, in his words and actions, demonstrated a consistent pattern. There is the clear command in the Sermon on the Mount to not resist evil and to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43), and to perfectly show mercy to the evil and the good so that we might be children of our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:45-48). The warning against anger (Matthew 5:21-22) fits the pattern. Beyond the Sermon, Jesus expresses grief over Jerusalem for its refusal to pursue the way of peace (Luke 19:42). He declares that his peace is different from this world's (John 14:27). He rebukes his disciples for desiring to exact retribution on the Samaritans who did not welcome him (Luke 9:55), a verse made even more telling in the King James Version in which Jesus adds, "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of." He emphatically rebukes Peter for drawing a weapon to defend Jesus and perhaps himself (Matthew 26:52). And at the last, Jesus refuses to defend himself with the "twelve legions of angels" that were ready at hand for his defense (Matthew 26:53). From the beginning to the end and in-between Jesus demonstrates a consistent pattern of peacefulness and rejection of violence, certainly lethal violence, even in self-defense.

Jesus calls his would-be disciples to deny themselves, take up the cross and follow him (Matthew 16:24) patterning our lives after his. He left us an example, so that we should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21) and "walk in love as he loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1). He calls them to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), sharing in his ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Following Jesus puts us at odds with the pattern of this world with its selfishness, violence, vengeance, and self/group-preservation. That is the pattern of the world to which we are warned not to conform in Romans 12:2. Romans 12 goes on to describe a community patterning its life on Jesus, including these echoes of Jesus, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" and, "Repay no one evil for evil, etc." (Romans 12:17-21). This is a thread that runs through the New Testament, most explicitly in passages like 1 Thessalonians 5:15, 1 Peter 2:20-25, 1 Peter 3:9-12, Hebrews 12:14, and James 3:18.

Tradition

This witness of the New Testament, along with the assurance that Death had been defeated in the death and resurrection of Jesus, led the earliest Christians to embrace a commitment to nonviolence as the best way to "follow in his steps." That attitude began to change some after the formal conversion of the Roman Empire. But only somewhat. There was a growing acceptance that government officials, including soldiers, might be authorized under specific conditions to use force and violence. But violence on a personal level was still considered sinful. St. Ambrose (340-397), Bishop of Milan, wrote,

I do not think that a Christian, a just and a wise man, ought to save his own life by the death of another; just as when he meets with an armed robber he cannot return his blows, lest in defending his life he should stain his love toward his neighbor. The verdict on this is plain and clear in the books of the Gospel, "Put up thy sword, for everyone that taketh the sword shall perish with the sword." (Matthew 26: 52). What robber is more hateful than the persecutor who came to kill Christ? But Christ would not be defended from the wounds of the persecutor, for He willed to heal all by His wounds.
(On the Duties of the Clergy)

St. Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo, is the most influential theologian in Christian history. He allowed that violence can be exercised faithfully by those to whom authority to do so is delegated by the government on behalf of the community, i.e., the courts, police, and the military. But that was only true for the one to whom authority was delegated. He concludes that to kill without that authority can only be murder (The City of God, I.21). He also wrote,

As to killing others in order to defend one's own life, I do not approve of this, unless one happens to be a soldier or public functionary acting, not for himself, but in defense of others or of the city in which he resides, if he acts according to the commission lawfully given him, and in the manner becoming his office. (Letter 47, To Publicola, sec. 5)

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was the most influential theologian of the Middle Ages. Going further than the witness of Jesus, he allows that using force in self-defense is permissible. But that should be done without the intent to kill.

But as it is unlawful to take a man's life, except for the public authority acting for the common good, as stated above (Article 3), it is not lawful for a man to intend killing a man in self-defense, except for such as have public authority, who while intending to kill a man in self-defense, refer this to the public good, as in the case of a soldier fighting against the foe, and in the minister of the judge struggling with robbers, although even these sin if they be moved by private animosity. (cf. Summa Theologia, II-II, 64,7)

The great Reformer, John Calvin's teaching significantly influenced early Anglicanism. In his commentary on Matthew 26:52 and elsewhere, he defends the right of magistrates to wield the sword. He also allows that a civilian *might* use violence to protect his or her property. But he imposes this stringent caveat,

And yet it is not the mere goodness of the cause that acquits the conscience from guilt, unless there be also pure affection. So then, in order that a man may properly and lawfully defend himself, he must first lay aside excessive wrath, and hatred, and desire of revenge, and all irregular sallies of passion, that nothing tempestuous may mingle with the defense. As this is of rare occurrence, or rather, as it scarcely ever happens, Christ properly reminds his people of the general rule, that they should entirely abstain from using the sword [and the gun]. (Commentary on Matthew 26:52)

So, for Calvin, an ordinary person/civilian might, in theory, resort to violence. But in practice, given the almost impossible requirement of dispassion for it to be just and not murder, Christians desiring to follow Christ should "entirely abstain from using the sword [and the gun]."

The Church discerned, given our broken and sinful humanity, that under certain prescribed and circumscribed circumstances, a degree of violence as a last resort might be necessary and therefore just. But that violence is reserved for those trained and authorized to exercise it under the law, with discipline and dispassion. We are grateful for their service. Even so, that use of violence is a concession to tragic human reality shaped by Sin and not something – for Christians, anyway – to bless, revel in, or glorify. And it is not something for individuals and civilians to take upon themselves.

Sin & Unregulated Passions

In referring to "irregular sallies of passion," Calvin was following Jesus who warned against the passions of the heart that lead to sin (cf Mark 7:21-23). In the New Testament and the Christian tradition, sin is not just about breaking rules, it is rooted in unregulated passions that disturb our inner peace and prevent us from living the peace of Christ.. According to Titus 3:3, being "slaves to various passions and pleasures" means "passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another." And when Paul lists the works of the flesh that are opposed to the Spirit, along with "fornication, impurity, and licentiousness," he also lists "idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these" (Galatians 5:19-21). In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus particularly warned against indulging in the passion of anger which he said is related to murder.

And so, self-control and regulating our passions is a recurrent theme in the New Testament and the early Church. It is rooted in Jesus' declaration that self-denial is a basic requirement for being among his followers (Matt. 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23). It is listed as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). The early Church continued recognizing the centrality of self-control to the Christian way.

Christianity asserts that each human person is created in the image of God and therefore sacred, beautiful, beloved of God, and of infinite value. But we are also all caught in the interrelated web of Sin. Even the most committed and faithful of us continues, this side of the kingdom of God, to be susceptible to the radical, pervasive reality of sin and uncontrolled passions that draw us from the love of God and our neighbor.

Our sinfulness infects us deep down in our hearts and distorts our imaginations. Thus, it infects even our best intentions. As Paul writes, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand" (Romans 7:21). This is true even for followers of Jesus. It is true even if we are as sure as we can be that our cause is just. Our hearts are still prone to selfishness, envy, greed, deceit (not least, self-deceit), anger, hatred, desire for revenge, and violence. Our hearts. *My* heart. *Your* heart. Not just the "bad" guys. Not just criminals. Not just the people we do not like. If we believe in sin at all, we believe it is radical, pervasive, and universal. There are no "good" guys. Even the best of us is prone to losing control and being a bad guy under stress and duress. We should therefore be distrustful of ourselves and our motives. And, as Calvin points out, we should distrust our ability to engage in violence righteously given our irregular sallies of passion.

We are a society in which we all have been encouraged to give free reign to every passion. We are all rather undisciplined and given to unregulated sallies of passion. This is a set up for trouble. We should not be surprised by the unprecedented levels of gun violence in this country and the resulting heartache and grief. If we take sin seriously, not least our own sinfulness and the sinfulness of those who are like us, we should not be surprised that a society flooded with guns is drowning in violence.

Christians, Weapons, and Regulation

The Second Amendment of the Constitution asserts that, "the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Just what that means in the context of the whole of the amendment has been a subject of debate. In 2008, the Supreme Court settled some of that debate for the time being when it decided *District of Columbia v. Heller*, in which the court held for the first time that the Second Amendment protected an individual right to gun ownership. Specifically, it held that the amendment protected an individual right to keep a usable handgun at home.

But that does not settle the question for Christians. The Constitution is a remarkable document that continues to guide the United States. But it is not inspired scripture. Christians must make a distinction between what is legal and what is faithful and moral. Regardless of particular laws allowing for it, it is hard to take Jesus, the Christian tradition, and the radical reality of sin seriously and to justify civilian disciples of Jesus owning weapons designed for war and the killing of human beings – created in the image of God. It is harder still to justify carrying such weapons in public where one might be tempted to give into sinful passions and fear and potentially kill someone. We ought not to put ourselves or others in the position of being tempted to murder intentionally or unintentionally.

District of Columbia v. Heller did not rule out all regulating of firearms. According to those involved in writing the decision, Heller “merely established the constitutional baseline that the government may not disarm citizens in their homes.” They go on,

The opinion expressly recognized “presumptively lawful” regulations such as “laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms,” as well as bans on carrying weapons in “sensitive places,” like schools, and it noted with approval the “historical tradition of prohibiting the carrying of ‘dangerous and unusual weapons.’” Heller also recognized the immense public interest in “prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill.”

(John Bash and Kate Shaw, ‘We Clerked for Justices Scalia and Stevens. America Is Getting Heller Wrong.’, *The New York Times*, May 31, 2022)

That leaves quite a bit of room for us as a society to pursue reasonable measures to address our epidemic of gun violence. Regulating guns is not the only thing necessary to address this epidemic. Addressing other issues like mental health, poverty, racism, and more effective policing are also necessary. We also need to re-evaluate our infatuation with the notion of “good” violence

The community has a stake in finding ways to assure that our common life is safe and good for everyone. We are not just a collection of individuals insisting on our own rights without regard for how the accumulation of our choices effect the whole and shape the society in which we live. No individual freedom is absolute, including the freedom to own weapons. Because we recognize the reality of sin, we have various laws and regulations to govern our common life. There are reasonable, common sense gun safety measures which polls consistently show enjoy the support of gun owners and non-gun owners alike that do not compromise responsible civilian gun ownership.

Gun violence has become a public health issue as well as a moral issue in the United States unparalleled in any other democratic, industrialized nation. Doing nothing to address that is irresponsible. As Jeremiah told those in exile in Babylon to “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.” For the sake of the welfare of this nation and our souls, let us pray for the grace to regulate ourselves, let us be peacemakers following in the footsteps of Jesus, and let us urge our elected officials (magistrates) to make sure that guns are well regulated to better address our epidemic of violence.