

Chapter Seventy-Six

God, Guns, and Gays: Does “No Killing” Also Mean “No Guns”?

Some conservative fundamentalists in the United States have lately been very motivated to vote in national elections by, among other things, the political issues surrounding “God, guns, and gays.” With respect just to the “God and guns” part, in light of the staunch conservative resistance to “gun control” and the seemingly unwavering support for the 2nd Amendment right for private citizens to bear arms, I am curious whether fundamentalists really believe that Jesus would want for us all to have our own guns and to be willing to use them if necessary (whatever “if necessary” may mean). If Jesus would really want for us all to have guns, I wonder if fundamentalists also think that our society should become like that of the “wild, wild West,” where people would carry guns in their holsters, ready to draw if anyone ever got out of line. Do fundamentalists really believe that there would be less gun violence in America if *everyone* carried around a loaded gun ready to use? For example, would the mass killings committed by the heavily-armed gunmen such as those in the Aurora, Colorado; Ft. Hood, Texas; Virginia Tech; Columbine High School, and Tucson, Arizona massacres have not occurred, or would have been mitigated, if the shooting victims in those incidents would have also had guns to shoot back at their attackers?

Somehow, arguing that Jesus wants for us all to carry guns around, maybe even in holsters, and be ready to draw seems rather farfetched, at best. I am unaware of any verse in the Bible supporting that proposition. So are we supposed to trust and believe in Jesus, but, in the event that our faith in God may not be enough to keep us safe, also be “packin’ heat”—you know, just in case we need to shoot or threaten to shoot somebody? Fundamentalists who also believe we should all be able to carry guns must think that Jesus’s teachings about turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), being meek (Ephesians 4:2), and loving your enemies (Matthew 5:44) are really just a bunch of “wimpy” liberal guidelines that have no place in the real world.

If owning guns is truly part of God’s plan for our lives, why didn’t Jesus, or any of His disciples, ever carry around swords for their own protection? After all, swords were the weaponry at that time in history. Even if Jesus wasn’t armed Himself, because He is God and therefore didn’t really need a sword to protect Himself, His disciples were not God, so why didn’t they always carry arms for protection? Although Peter once drew a sword to protect Jesus, in Matthew 26:52, Jesus told Peter to put the sword down, and went on to say “. . . for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword,” which hardly seems like any kind of positive endorsement of bearing arms. If their protection was Jesus, such that their faith was

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enough to keep them safe, why isn't faith in Jesus enough for all of us in modern times? Why do we now also need arms if Jesus's disciples did not need arms? Can't God keep us safe?

Also, in 1787, when our founders wrote the 2nd Amendment as a part of the Bill of Rights to the US Constitution, the arms available were flintlock single-action muskets that were not capable of easily taking out an entire crowd the way modern firearms can, so this presents yet another interpretation problem. As technology progresses, why should we stop at swords or handguns? If there is a right to bear arms (ignoring for just a moment the part of the 2nd Amendment that talks about having a "well-regulated militia," suggesting that the right to bear arms may have been simply a way for the *states*, not just the *federal* government, to be able to maintain armed militias), why limit the *scope and power* of the arms to which we all have a personal constitutional right? In other words, where is the reasonable stopping point of the arms to which we are all entitled? This is a 2nd Amendment issue as well as a biblical issue. If Jesus thinks it is a good idea for me to have a gun, why wouldn't Jesus love the idea of me owning my own bazooka, my own rocket launcher, or my own tank? What about a flame-thrower? That would be cool. Or how about having my own remote-controlled predator drone? But maybe those kinds of weapons should be owned and operated *only* by, to use a 2nd Amendment term, a "well-regulated militia," so perhaps only military armies and police forces should have such arms, and not private citizens, who might get angry in a fight and use them mistakenly or irresponsibly, not to mention what an evil mad man might do. Do I have a right to any weapon, as long as I can carry it in my hands—is that what to "bear arms" means?

If not just professionals should bear these bigger arms and we all should bear any and all arms we prefer, then why not say that all of us should be able to own our own nuclear weapons? Although some people might exclaim, "Now that would be going too far," why would that be too far? Is it because certain arms would be *too* dangerous to allow private citizens to have pursuant to their 2nd Amendment right to bear arms? So, perhaps there is a constitutional right to bear arms, but only those arms that can easily kill "only" *a few* people at a time but if an arm can easily kill *a lot* of people all at once, there should be no right to bear such an arm because it would be "too dangerous." Should that be the meaningful stopping point for the types of arms that we have a right to bear, or should any citizen be allowed to own any arm, no matter what that arm might be, as it is very difficult to make a distinction between an arm that is "dangerous," as opposed to an arm that is "too dangerous"?

Of course, we can always go to the other extreme and just ban *all* guns in every situation, but if we do that, someone might say, "Alright, but if we outlaw all guns, then we have to outlaw all kitchen knives, too, because they can be used to kill someone, as well as all hammers, shovels, and baseball bats!" Such a sweeping law can't be right, however, as that would clearly go too far. So maybe there is something to the old pro-gun mantra, "Guns don't kill people, people do;" because often, people kill other people with whatever they can find, including their own bare hands. That argument makes a fair point, demonstrating that everything regarding the types of arms that citizens should be able to own is just a question of degree and of "acceptable" risk.

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Drawing a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable risk may work well at the extremes—for example, we probably can and should risk private citizens owning knives (as there are many useful, nonlethal reasons to allow citizens to own knives), but it would be an unacceptable risk to allow private citizens to own their own nuclear weapons (after all, what would be the useful, nonlethal reason for having such a profoundly lethal weapon—perhaps to kill weeds...a *lot* of weeds?). If a person used a rocket launcher to take out a city block, killing hundreds of people, however, would we still say, “Rocket launchers don’t kill people, people do”? Maybe, but rocket launchers sure make killing many people at once a whole lot easier, so perhaps citizens should not have such easy access to such powerful weapons—a “reasonable” right to bear some arms, but not really destructive military ones with thousands and thousands of rounds of ammunition.

Unfortunately, the overall point about the difficulty in attempting to draw a meaningful bright line of distinction inside of a spectrum of choices remains stubbornly apparent. The extreme example (kitchen knives versus nuclear weapons) presents a fairly easy call to make, but where do we draw a workable and meaningful dividing line? At what exact point do we cross over from arms for citizens that pose “acceptable risks” (knives) to arms for citizens that pose “unacceptable risks” (nukes)? A bright line of distinction is not defined in the Bible, nor is it defined in the US Constitution, and anyone trying to define that line would be engaging in his or her own private interpretation informed by his or her own subjective opinions and personal values.

Complicating this issue even further is that the precise amount of “acceptable risk” we should allow is probably a moving target (pun intended). Some would argue that as technology marches on and our armament capabilities advance accordingly, Jesus would want for us to “keep up with the times” by arming ourselves with the very same powerful modern weaponry with which criminals and terrorists are arming themselves. As a result, would that mean that we should have a “reasonable” right to bear arms *in light of the times and changing technological and historical circumstances*? If so, where does the Bible (or the US Constitution) specifically make such a claim? If it is merely implied, how are we to interpret such an implication in everyday situations? If there is such a verse in the Bible, implied or otherwise, aren’t there far more verses in the Bible that would suggest that Jesus would *not* want all of His children to walk around fully armed, especially with the latest technological weapons and firepower, to be able to threaten or to actually harm or even kill each other?

Maybe it is very unfair to criticize the Bible’s lack of a clear answer to a very modern problem (the right to bear arms), that is even further complicated by ever-changing technology, which fundamentally alters the very nature of available arms and weaponry. Moreover, although there are other modern contexts that the Bible does not address, that absence probably does not mean that the Bible should be considered antithetical to all things modern or that the Bible lacks modern applicability. I discount here negative things people have said in the past about what

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they think the Bible would say about all modern inventions, such as “If man were meant to fly, God would have given him wings,” but there are more legitimate questions and concerns.

For example, the Bible does not say that we should all wear seatbelts in cars or wear sunscreen when exposed to the sun for long periods, even though we probably should generally do those things. I cannot think of any biblical verse that would suggest otherwise, despite the fact that seatbelts and sunscreen are not specifically mentioned or suggested in the Bible, given the historical context. Although some might say that if it is God’s will that one has a car accident or gets skin cancer, then we should not try to alter God’s will with our technology, I can imagine Jesus telling His disciples to wear seatbelts if they were ever in cars or to wear sunscreen if they ever were to spend all day at the beach, much more easily than I can imagine Jesus telling His followers to always carry around loaded guns, ready to use—especially big guns with a lot of modern firepower to counter that of modern criminals and terrorists. Would Jesus reasonably limit His desire for us to own guns to our being able to carry around only *unloaded* guns, or would having to take precious time to load the guns violate our 2nd Amendment rights (and His plans for us) to be able to thwart crime or to protect ourselves in emergency circumstances? How about allowing guns but not silencers on guns because a silencer’s only purpose is to conceal the use of a gun; would prohibiting silencers therefore be a reasonable limit on gun ownership that is not protected by the 2nd Amendment (or what Jesus would want)? So, is there a constitutional right to reasonable guns, or is there only a constitutional right to *loud* reasonable guns? What about children owning guns, mental patients owning guns, former felons owning guns, why are those regulations not considered to be violations of the 2nd Amendment right to bear arms? Would Jesus think those laws were unreasonable limitations? If criminals can wear bullet-proof vests, does that mean that we should have a right to buy armor-piercing, “hollow-point,” “cop-killer” bullets? If so, where does it end? Is it really God’s will that we engage in a citizens’ arms race to possess ever more powerful weaponry?

I am not trying to be radically extreme and completely anti-gun here. I am not saying that Jesus would not believe in self-defense or hunting or target practice, necessarily, or even the ability to threaten someone with a gun in order to deter someone from committing violence. I admit that if my family were threatened, I would rather have a gun to protect them than not have a gun. God probably does approve of such uses of guns, I would imagine, but where does it specifically *say* that, *definitively*, in the Bible? Should my personal desire to have a gun if I am afraid be the standard we use to formulate overall gun policy in the United States? If the Bible either explicitly or implicitly suggests that God would so approve of guns, how and why is that not contradicted by other literal verses in the Bible about nonviolence?

This “Does Jesus really want me to have a gun?” issue seems to require a great deal of very involved, subjective private interpretation, and even pure conjecture, about what Jesus might think about Americans owning guns, or hand grenades, for that matter. How do we literally interpret Jesus’s statements about peace in the Bible in light of this concern about the right to bear arms? Often, the very difficult thing about asking “What would Jesus do?” is that we have

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no idea what Jesus would do and we ought not to pretend like we do as a simple matter of literal interpretation of the Bible. What in the world Jesus would do in any number of certain specific, unique, and entirely modern circumstances cannot always definitively be discerned from biblical verses, so would anyone's guess here about Jesus's overall gun policy necessarily be better than anyone else's guess?

I admit that I do not know, and I do not think anyone else knows, either. Still, my personal guess is that Jesus probably does *not* want for us all to walk around with loaded, or even unloaded, guns. Besides, how safe would we really be if we all had guns pointed at one another? Does mutually assured destruction (MAD) work? MAD works if entire countries or nation-states, such as the United States and the old Soviet Union, are involved in détente, have a sufficient self-interested incentive to live, and are not willing to engage in a nuclear war for some political cause. In contrast, détente in which every citizen is fully armed personally would not work unless every single citizen is a rational actor with a greater self-interested incentive to live than to die, is not a sociopath, and is not subject to making a mistake or ever exercising bad or overly emotional judgment. That, however, seems highly unlikely, especially for more than 315 million Americans; indeed, if MAD did work, we never would have had a gun fight in the Old West or a duel anywhere else! People often assume that they would survive. Recall what the Romans eventually realized about themselves: "We came, we saw, we conquered, but in the end, the enemy was us." Or perhaps even more fitting, "if you live by the sword, you die by the sword" (as gun-owners are more likely to be harmed by guns than non-gun owners).

Assuming, just for a moment, that Jesus does *not* want for us all to have guns (not that He necessarily thinks that, but just assume for the moment, for the sake of this argument, that He does), should all Christians work to repeal the 2nd Amendment to the US Constitution because it would be contrary to the biblical teaching that not all citizens should have their own guns? I don't think so, even if that is what the Bible said. There may be good policy reasons to either limit gun ownership or not limit gun ownership, but we probably should separate our personal religious beliefs from our legal public policy choices. We should decide political and religious issues each within their own sphere, because, again, we do not live in a theocracy. What if the government ruled that churches have to teach both creation and evolution to "teach the controversy"? Fortunately, that would and should never happen, because we live in a constitutional democracy, with a constitutional right to freely and privately exercise our own religions. The government therefore should stay out of the church and the church should stay out of government, unless Sunday schools have to start teaching calculus, quantum theory, and even evolution, according to government proclamation.