

A Legitimate Case For Protective Violence

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I am truly honored and humbled to be asked to participate in this important time together. Since my arrival in Bakersfield over 23 years ago to assume the pastorate of Laurel Glen Bible Church, I have come to deeply value my association with this body of believers. I come to you with traditional evangelical convictions. I believe that the Bible in its entirety is the God-breathed, therefore infallible, revelation of God to sinful man, and I believe that the Scripture never contradicts itself as the character and purposes of God are progressively revealed from Genesis through Revelation.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the Holy Spirit-conceived and sinless son of Mary and Son of God; that he's the exact representation of God's being; that he's our perfect prophet, priest and king; that he died on the cross for our sins and rose from the grave; and I believe that by a faith union with him we are eternally justified, sanctified and glorified. What amazing grace God has bestowed upon us through his Son!

I believe that the Holy Spirit is the illuminator of God's Word and continues the process of guiding his people into the understanding and application of biblical truth; and that growth in that venture involves a community process as we humbly listen to and learn from each other while on this temporary journey; thus the value of this type of conference. And I approach this topic with the full awareness of Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13, that "now we know in part." Thus I approach this task with that spirit, without dogmatism, and with respect for the insights of others.

I affirm the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith; but frankly, when questioned about Article 13 in numerous membership classes, I developed the opinion that this Article could benefit from further thought and development. Although I appreciate its emphasis on reconciliation and peacemaking, I struggle with some of the implications of the Article's language.

My struggle with Article 13

To set the stage, I ask: When an elderly couple in our church was murdered in 2008 as their home was invaded and robbed late at night, would self-protection or spouse-protection through forceful action have been legitimate? Or, as a neighbor saw the crime unfold, would trying to stop it with force have been legitimate?

If I'm walking down the street with my grandkids, who live here in Phoenix (once designated the kidnap capital of the nation), and someone jumps out of a van and attempts to grab one or both of them, is protective violence legitimate? If I had been present on the Newtown, Conn., campus when the deranged young man commenced to kill 26 innocent children and adults, would stopping him with the utmost force have been legitimate?

If a terrorist should enter a church service obviously intending to murder defenseless churchgoers, is some sort of forceful, even violent, thwarting of his attempt a legitimate move? On the national scene, is protection of our country and its people from an evil, murderous enemy ever justified? Is protective violence ever legitimate at personal or community or national levels? When people read Article 13, would they conclude that such protective violence has a place or no place on this temporary earthly journey?

Defining violence

One of my home dictionaries defines “violence” as “swift and intense force; rough or injurious physical force, action or treatment.” My other dictionary defines it as “physical force employed so as to violate, damage or abuse,” that definition containing more of an evil connotation. For our purposes today, I’m defining violence as “forceful physical action toward others to accomplish a purpose.” And I ask: Is strong action involving debilitating physical force of some kind toward others ever legitimate, especially if the purpose seems good?

It appears that violence of any kind had no place in the original creation, nor will it have any place in our fully redeemed state in heaven. It’s obvious that the use of force is often evil in its purpose and manifests itself in aggressive and horrible conflict, leaving tremendous heartache and suffering in its wake. Certainly the call to peacemaking, patient suffering, nonretaliation, and overcoming evil with good is God’s will for his people in the present.

Article 13 summarizes it well when it states: “Believers seek to be agents of reconciliation in all relationships, to practice love of enemies as taught by Christ, to be peacemakers in all situations.” But where I have issue is with the next two statements: “We view violence in its many different forms as contradictory to the new nature of the Christian. We believe that the evil and inhumane nature of violence is contrary to the gospel of love and peace.” When I read the reference to “violence in its many different forms” as “contradictory to the new nature of the Christian,” what’s implied to me is that “many different forms” means “all” forms. And in the next statement, the reference to “the evil and inhumane nature of violence” implies, as I read it, that there are no exceptions, meaning that all violence is “evil and inhumane.”

No exceptions?

Perhaps it was not the intention of the Article’s authors, but the implication to me and, apparently, many others who read it, is that violence, “the use of physical force to achieve a purpose” is always wrong and never right. It is always “evil and inhumane” and always “contradictory to the new nature of the Christian” and the gospel. I would propose that certain forms of violence, particularly protective violence, are legitimate and not “evil and inhumane.” Allow me to share why I think so.

My first argument comes from the words of Jesus in Matthew 22, in which he is asked about the greatest commandment. The question is asked by a Pharisee, an expert in the Old Testament, who was involved with his fellow Jews in studying the meaning and relative importance of the Old Testament commandments. They had classified over 600 Old Testament laws into 360-plus positive commands and 240-plus negative commands and had designated

some as great, some as least -- or as heavy and light commandments -- as they attempted to rank their relative importance.

In their hair-splitting debates about the meaning and significance and rank of each of these commands, this Pharisee asks Jesus, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (v.36). The purpose or motive of this question, Matthew says, was to "test him." Verse 22 says that "when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together," apparently to discern a way to try and stump Jesus, since the Sadducees couldn't. So they obviously decided to see how he would weigh in on this debate, selecting a lawyer in the group to question him. "Jesus, we're debating among ourselves the relative importance of God's commands to us, and we're wondering what you would classify as the greatest of these 600 commands."

Jesus' answer is most familiar to us, as he quotes two commands from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. Jesus says: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it. 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (vv.37-39). I take "like it" to mean like it in the sense of "just as important." These two commands, Jesus said, are linked together as being of equal priority, rank, importance.

What I find most interesting is what Jesus adds in verse 40: "On these commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." "Law and Prophets" was their term for what we call the Old Testament. The Old Testament, Jesus says, "depends" on these two commands, and the Greek word from which depends is translated is found six other times in the New Testament, usually translated "hang." Four of those occurrences refer to Jesus or the other two hanging next to him on a cross; another to a millstone being hung around one's neck; and the other referring to that poisonous snake hanging from Paul's hand in Acts 28.

So to be consistent with the common use of that word, Jesus is saying that the entire Old Testament hangs on these two great commands, which says to me is that every one of God's commands to his chosen people hangs on hooks under these two great commands. Every command of God serves as a sub-point describing and clarifying what it means to love the Lord your God and to love neighbors, "neighbors" referring to all the relationships in life, some of whom would be called "enemies." We love God and we love people by obeying these commands. Paul teaches something similar in Romans 13 and Galatians 5.

Use of force for good purposes

What's interesting to me is with several of these commands (hooks, sub-points, descriptors, clarifiers of love), God commands the use of force, i.e. violence. Loving God may involve violence in the sense of "use of physical force toward others to accomplish a good purpose." Use of force for evil purposes? No, never. Use of force for good purposes? Yes, sometimes deadly force.

Why does God command the Israelites to conduct violent stone-throwing execution of their fellow citizens who commit certain sins? Because he loves his people and wants to protect his holiness and his people from the devastation that unholiness brings. And if the Israelites love God, they will follow through and obey such acts of protective violence.

Why does God command death for certain Sabbath violations? Because he wants to keep his Sabbath holy, which is what's best for his people whom he loves; and if they truly love God, they will protect the holiness of the Sabbath and will violently execute those who don't.

Why does God command his people to kill certain false prophets? So "you shall purge the evil from your midst" (Deut. 13:5). God is saying, "You, my people, will employ life-ending force for my purpose of keeping yourselves pure, because I love you." Why does God command the Israelites to violently and totally wipe out certain city populations in the conquest of their promised land? Is it not because he loves his people and wants to protect them from the corrupting and decaying influence of the immorality and idolatry that permeates those people groups?

We could reference other illustrations of God's powerful physical force for a good purpose. And what I ask is this: Are these forms of violence that God commands evil and inhumane forms? Does God's use or command of violence make him evil and inhumane? I admittedly struggle with some of the Old Testament violence commanded and ordained by God, but for our purpose today I'm attempting to communicate that if every command of God to his people is an expression of his love and is designed to protect those whom he loves from immorality and idolatry and other corruption, how can we conclude that all violence is evil and inhumane, especially if it is exercised or commanded by God for the loving protection of his people?

What I conclude, therefore, from the words of Jesus about the nature of the Law and the Prophets is that some forms of violence are actually expressions of God's love, not evil and inhumane. I conclude that the love of God and our love for God may include protective violence.

When God ordains violence

I also observe that in the New Testament, as I see God strike down Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), apparently for the good purpose of loving the church and communicating to the church the seriousness of hypocrisy and deceit in its life. I also see it in the actions of God in the concluding book of Revelation, in which he pours out violent "bowls of wrath" upon the inhabited earth.

I observe it in Revelation 19 describing the return of Jesus, the "Faithful and True One," with a sword proceeding from his mouth while riding on a white horse, the armies of heaven coming with him as "in righteousness he judges and makes war" (v.11). I see the use of incredible force, i.e. violence, to accomplish his good purpose of judging and restoring righteousness to earth. I ask: Is that Jesus-led violence evil and inhumane? I think not!

So if violence ordained and commanded by God and employed by Jesus at his return is not evil and inhumane, I ask: Is all use of force by us, who are created in God's image evil and inhumane? Is any and all use of force by us "contradictory to the new nature of the Christian," as stated in Article 13? I think not!

Protective violence by those in authority

When Jesus says in Matthew 5 that “I have not come to abolish but to fulfill” the Law” (v.17), I admit that I don’t fully grasp all the implications of that challenging statement and paragraph. I love the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus partially explains what he means by developing the spirit and true intent of some of the Old Testament Laws.

I acknowledge that with Jesus’ death on the cross, our relationship to some of that Law changes, and because we are not Old Testament Israel, many of the laws for that theocracy are not relevant for us. But I don’t believe that God’s character changes as we transition from the Old to the New Testaments. One of his notable attributes is immutability, as stated in Malachi: “I the Lord do not change” (3:6). The emphasis in the New Testament obviously shifts to Jesus and the significance of his ministry, but God is still the same God.

For example, it is clear from Romans 13 that God ordains governing authorities to “bear the sword,” the “sword” being a symbol for any instrument of force, even death, to accomplish the good purpose of judgment and protection. And who wields that sword? Government officials are people, and Paul says of such people that the governing authority who “bears the sword” is “God’s servant for your good....He’s the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (v.4).

So if the authority of the governing sword to punish wrongdoing and protect the citizens from such evildoing is ordained by God, is that tool of force carried out by appropriate citizens an evil and inhumane tool? I think not! Clearly, God ordains a certain protective violence, and I, personally, don’t see anything wrong with Christians serving in that God-ordained ministry of bearing the sword for God’s good purpose of protecting citizens from evil.

Peter supports Paul by saying that “governors are sent by the Lord to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Pet. 2:14). So how can we say that the use of force for that purpose is evil and inhumane if it’s sent by the Lord? It seems to me that there still is a place in the heart and mind of our loving God for a violence, a use of force, for the purpose of protecting God’s people from the influence of evil. Protective violence administered by God-ordained authority is still legitimate, and not evil and inhumane.

Do not resist?

But what about ordinary citizens who are not called to serve God in that type of protective ministry? In light of what we have seen thus far, what do we do with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5 about “not resisting the one who is evil” and “loving your enemies”? Do his words mean that protective violence carried out by individuals is evil and inhumane? It seems that Jesus is forbidding the use of force when evil attacks. My understanding of “resist not” means “resist not,” that we are not to get involved in a violent response when evil attacks and just let evil happen. But let’s put the words of Jesus in appropriate context.

Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’” (5:38), as he refers to passages in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He’s referring to what became known in Latin as “Lex Talionis,” that term referring to the law of justice administered by the judges of Israel and courts of law. In Deuteronomy the Lord tells the judges to “inquire diligently” (19:18) and “it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (19:21). One purpose of this “eye for eye” type legislation was to curtail crime and protect society with

appropriate and fitting punishment of the crime. Another purpose was to protect the offender from punishment harsher than the offense would justify.

Now again, Jesus “did not come to abolish the Law,” including the role of God-ordained government for justice and protective purposes. But in this Matthew 5 text, Jesus is clarifying that Lex Talionis was never intended for personal relationships. After all, the Lord said in Leviticus 19 that “you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v.18). Apparently the rabbis were teaching individuals that “tooth for tooth” type laws were for their personal relationships as well; that if someone hits you in the mouth and knocks out a tooth, you have the right, even the duty, to retaliate and get even, but within limits. The rabbis apparently were focused on defining appropriate retaliation, fitting revenge, how to settle the score against individuals who hurt you.

Jesus clarifies by saying, “But I say to you: do not resist the one who is evil.” “Resist” here, some believe, means that no Jesus-follower should ever assume a position of resistance to evil, and therefore should not join the military or the police force, even though such positions of authority are ordained by God to resist evil. And we respect those who hold that conviction. But it seems to me that “resist” in this context has the idea of “setting oneself against” in order to retaliate, to settle the score.

Four examples

Jesus seems to be saying that instead of getting even with your neighbor by misapplying Lex Talionis, love your enemy and seek to serve those who hurt you, and he gives four examples of what that might look like. When slapped on the cheek (a severe insult), turn the other cheek to demonstrate your nonretaliation spirit; instead of going through a lawsuit to keep a piece of clothing, give him additional clothing; instead of being forced to go one mile, offer to go two; and instead of refusing to help one who asks for financial assistance, give to the one who begs.

I won’t take the time to elaborate on each of those illustrations, but the theme I pick up here is that instead of responding to wrongdoing with prideful, retaliatory purposes, respond with serving, generous grace purposes. Instead of defining “tooth for tooth” laws for personal relationships, Jesus-followers are to replace prideful, settling-the-score type responses, when offense occurs, with humble and generous grace-type responses.

Jesus is not saying that if we’re abused, we should somehow communicate with turning the other cheek: “Do it again, do it again,” nor should we wear a sign saying, “Please walk all over me because I’m a doormat follower of Jesus.” No, what Jesus is doing is painting a picture of relational strength governed by humble grace rather than prideful revenge. He’s painting a portrait of a Jesus-follower who is so secure and so mature in that relationship with Jesus that he doesn’t have to engage in self-focused, prideful retaliation when attacked in order to prove himself. He instead is able to rise above the way he’s being treated and respond in a powerful and merciful ministry-driven pattern.

In 1 Peter 2, the apostle calls us to follow the example of Jesus: “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (2:23). In other words, he didn’t retaliate. Jesus was so secure in himself and in his relationship with his Father that he didn’t have to prove

how big he was or how right he was by retaliating against those who hurt him. To the Romans Paul wrote something similar: "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'" (12:17-19).

So as I see it in its context, when Jesus says "resist not the evil person," he's addressing retaliation and revenge issues. He's addressing the heart issue when it wants to resist the evil attacker by retaliating and settling the score. He's not addressing whether or not a Jesus-follower should protect oneself or someone else who is being attacked. He is not saying that if you, a loved one, or a neighbor are being attacked, that you need to stand by and do nothing.

Love means protecting

After all, doesn't Christian love include a protective element? If a husband loves his wife in Ephesians 5 style, nourishing and cherishing her with self-sacrificing, Christ-like love, wouldn't that include protecting her as much as he could from evil? But, you might say, Jesus goes on to say in Matthew 5 that I am to "love my neighbor as myself," even if that neighbor is an enemy. But I ask: Does a pacifistic, nonresistant stance mean that love of enemy "trumps" (to use a card-playing term) or outranks love of wife, love of children, love of grandchildren, love of neighbor, love of country? Is Jesus saying that love of enemy is the highest ranking love – above all other loves – and if one has to choose between loving enemy or loving wife, loving enemy is a higher priority?

Yes, I am to love my enemy in serving-type ways whenever possible, but I see no evidence that it means I am to allow my enemy to abuse my loved ones and not get involved in loving protection, even if it means using debilitating force. If violence is the use of physical force toward others to accomplish a purpose, and if loving protection of a wife, a child, a grandchild, a church, a community or a nation requires the use of protective violence, my conclusion is: Go for it. Use limited, but appropriate and enough force, if seeking to prevent further abuse is the motive, the purpose. If retaliation and revenge are the motives, that's another story, but if stopping the person's abuse toward the one being attacked is the motive, that's a good, legitimate, protective and loving use of force.

Love of enemy cannot and must not trump protective love of those that the enemy seeks to abuse. I see that in the actions of Jesus, when he entered the abused temple and used physical force for the good purpose of driving out the moneychangers for inappropriate use of the temple. I hear Jesus, when speaking of the value of children, that it would be better if a child abuser would have a millstone hung around his neck and tossed into the sea, communicating that protective violence is legitimate when children are threatened with abuse. I see Jesus supporting protective violence when he told the disciples in Luke 22, who were apparently entering a physically dangerous phase of their mission, that they should sell some valuables to purchase a sword. Why would they need a sword if resisting the evil person is always wrong?

Could not Jesus be saying there that in certain dangerous situations, the use of the sword would be legitimate for self and/or fellow-disciple protection? When Peter attempted to cut off the servant's ear as Jesus was being arrested, then, according to Jesus, it was wrong to use the sword he was earlier told to buy, for he knew that his time had come to fulfill his mission of dying as our saving sacrifice, and Peter was not to resist that mission.

We must interpret Scripture with Scripture, and as I see it, we should not allow “resist not the evil one” and “love your enemy” to trump all the biblical evidence for legitimate protective violence. In my opinion, Article 13 should be revised to reflect that loving protection of others, using forceful physical action, if necessary, is legitimate, is not “evil and inhumane” and is not “contradictory to the new nature of the Christian.”

Loving God and loving people: “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

*All scriptures quoted from English Standard Version

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