

Response to “A Legitimate Case for Protective Violence”

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Pastor Roger Poppen’s paper is irenic in tone as he takes issue with Article 13 “Love and Nonresistance.” He begins with a rehearsal of shared beliefs about Bible, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit. He cites situations which, in his view, call into question two statements in Article 13, i.e., 1) “We view violence in its many different forms as contradictory to the new nature of the Christian,” and 2) “We believe that the evil and inhumane nature of violence is contrary to the gospel of love and peace.” His paper is carefully focused on these two statements. In making his case he remains close to Biblical texts and biblical stories, and to my delight, cites the Old Testament which Anabaptists are in the habit of sidelining. In interacting with the paper, attention might be given to several claims which raise significant issues.

1. **Gray areas:** Are all Biblical instructions categorically black and white, or is allowance to be made for gray areas (such as divorce)? In similar vein, is the Confession to be read in black and white terms? Poppen says, “The reference to ‘the evil and inhuman nature of violence’ implies, as I read it, that there are no exceptions, meaning that **all** violence is ‘evil and inhumane.’” For his part, Poppen argues in favor of one form of violence, “protective violence.” In citing the Confession of faith, must one not take the context into account, namely that the Confession is intended to stake out a position without resorting to legalization and unending qualifications?

For Discussion: Is the question about the use of force (violence) by the Christian to be answered with a “yes” or a “no” or are there gray areas?

2. **Arenas of application:** The case for protective violence is made at the levels of the personal (e.g., threat of kidnapping), the community (e.g., Newtown school shooting) and the nation (e.g., Iraq). At the national level, would the author’s position favor the “preemptive strike?” Compare Augustine’s Just War theory, which held that war might be a last resort if diplomatic actions had failed. Augustine also noted criteria such as deaths of civilians.

While the use of force at the level of the state through police and law enforcement is supported by Romans 13, and might by extension apply to the nation and even in our world to the United Nations, does validation of force at those levels apply equally at the personal level? The Pauline instruction regarding law enforcement is applicable at institutional level for state, county and city. Do not matters stand differently for individuals?

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was addressed to his followers. As for the state, hardly does it see itself subject to the way of Jesus. But are not Christians, who submit to Christ's teaching and authority, instructed not to retaliate in whatsoever manner, including so-called protective violence?

For Discussion: Can one generalize the use or non-use of force at all three levels (personal, community, national), or must some distinctions be observed?

3. About Bible interpretation:

3.1 The position argued in the paper is that the overarching consideration for ethical decisions has to do with loving God and loving the neighbor. In a vivid metaphor, the author depicts all instructions in the Scriptures to hang on hooks (subpoints, descriptors of love) fastened to the two beams of loving God and loving neighbor. This is said to mean that both in loving God and loving neighbor, physical force -- even deadly force -- becomes legitimate. His examples are: laws demanding stoning for adultery, Sabbath violations, killing false prophets, wiping out Canaanite cities as part of Israel's conquest. These violent actions "protect" God's holiness; they also "protect Israel from temptations to idolatry," etc.

Are these instructions for God's chosen people living under a theocracy to be applied universally? Or must one understand such commands in the larger context of the gospel and the action of Jesus, who, to take one example, did not cast a stone on the adulterous woman (John 8:3-11)? The large question here is: How do we interpret the OT/NT connection?

3.2 God is cited for his violent actions (e.g., striking down Ananias and Sapphira (Acts), with heavenly armies taking out the unrighteous hordes (Book of Revelation). Do these divine actions imply that God-followers are entitled to the same drastic actions? True, believers are to be imitators of God (Eph. 5:1; 1Thess. 1:6; 2:14) but in what way? Did not Jesus show what that way is? Jesus taught about "not resisting the one who is evil" (Matt 5:39). The writer notes that some take this to mean "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." Our author counters by explaining that "Jesus seems to be saying that instead of getting even, one should seek to serve those who hurt you." That interpretation is widely shared. Compare Richard Gardner's summary: "Do not insist on your rights as an offended party" (*Believers Church Bible Commentary*, p. 109).

Such interpretation raises the question whether the term "nonresistance" as in the title of Article 13, "Love and Nonresistance" is helpful. Does this language communicate the gist of the Matthew text? How might the intent of the article be better stated?

Moreover, along with Jesus' teaching, is his example. As stated in 1 Peter, Christians are to follow Jesus' example who did not resort to protective violence (1 Pet. 2:21-23). He refused, as a measure of protective violence, to call down 12 legions of angels (Matt. 25:63). When Jesus was about to be arrested and Peter drew a sword for the purpose of protective violence, Jesus did not commend him but rebuked him. God's so-called violent actions do not give humans license to act with violence.

3.3 The writer notes regarding the OT that "because we are not Old Testament Israel, many of the laws for that theocracy are not relevant for us." Do you agree? Is it helpful to note that the OT was not written **to** us but **for** us? That is, Christians are not under obligation to follow instructions that are situation specific, as in stoning an adulterous woman, but need to understand that from the OT we are to gain a worldview about God and his ways.

3.4 In interpreting Scripture, what attention should be given to the larger context, namely the gospel message over all? The message of Christ's death and resurrection, especially his resurrection, testifies to transformation. Believers who embrace the gospel have reason to witness to that transformation. Is the view which advocates protective violence a witness to the transforming power of the gospel? Does it need to? How does the resurrection, with God's unexpected intervention bear on the question of "protective violence?"

For Discussion: Have Anabaptists rightly set the Sermon on the Mount as the "gold standard" for Christian ethics?

4. Definitions. The author defines violence as "forceful physical action to accomplish any purpose." This definition which gives a positive valence to the term (in contrast to one of his dictionary definitions which is more negative in its connotation) is then laid alongside the Confession of Faith which describes violence as "evil and inhumane." The author is troubled by the implication that God's destructive actions must then be regarded as "evil and inhumane." Is clarification needed to make the point that the wording of "evil and inhumane" refers in the Confession to human actions of violence?

For Discussion: If in general public discourse violence is associated with harm, is it not then confusing to endorse violence for the Christian?

5. Handling threatening situations. The author cites several actual and hypothetical situations in the "every day" that warrant violence (such as the murder of an elderly church couple, hypothetical kidnapping, hypothetical terrorist action in a church at worship). In advocating protective violence in threatening situations, the author assumes that he/she knows fully the intentions of the assailant, that

other strategies are unworkable (reasoning, offering money) and that the intervention of violent action will be judged “legal” and will be “successful.”

But should not alternatives to violence in these instances be considered? Example: Henry Dick (Reedley) tells that in Russia Bolsheviks broke into their home, had the father kneel, put a gun to his head and advised, “Whatever God you believe in, make your prayer now!” Henry’s mother put her hand on the arm of one of the teenagers and said sympathetically. “You must be hungry. We don’t have much food, but can I make you a meal?” They agreed! Intervention, yes, but not through protective violence. For a challenging argument together with similar stories, see the expanded edition by John H. Yoder, *What would you do... if a Violent Person Threatened to Harm a Loved one?* (Herald Press, 1992).

A. For Discussion: How do you evaluate “protective violence” in the light of MB history and identity (since 1860) and Anabaptists’ “pacifist” convictions (since 1530s)?

B. For Discussion: In our cultural situation is it more profitable to sort out positions on violence or would we do better to engage in discussions about peacemaking?

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