

Pacifism?

By Ben Wallick

Many Christian denominations throughout history have taught that under no circumstances is it ever justified for Christians to use violence and those who participate in any violent act are in violation of Jesus' teachings. Additionally, many teach that Christians must not function in any form of civil service where violence may have to be used as part of their duty. On the surface, this may appear to be a noble position but is it actually what Jesus taught?

The Bible is packed full of violent events which God's servants not only participated in but were blessed in the process. Abraham was "blessed" by the Son of God after rescuing Lot and slaughtering the Kings.¹ Phinehas thrust a javelin through Zimri and Cozbi and God then made a "covenant of peace" with him to establish his descendants for "an everlasting priesthood."² God told Joshua "YHVH God your God is with you wherever you go" as he went about conquering the cities of Canaan and "slew with the sword all that breathed in it."³ David of whom God said, "a man after My own heart, who will do all My will"⁴ drove a stone into the skull of Goliath then decapitated him.⁵ Elijah was called a "Man of God" having YHVH answer his prayer by fire then executing the 450 prophets of Baal.⁶ In all these instances God reckoned these violent acts as "Faith" in Him. Should all these actions be brushed off as Old Testament stuff that Jesus nullified when He arrived? Did God's attitude toward the use of violence by His servants suddenly change?

The Pacifist claims that these are all examples of behavior that was condoned under The Law of Moses but is forbidden under the New Covenant. Granted there are significant differences between these two covenants and how God's commands relate to His people but Abraham's actions were performed long before God established His Covenant with the nation of Israel. In Romans chapter 4 Paul juxtaposes obtaining righteousness through the Law of Moses with the faith that Abraham demonstrated.

¹ Genesis 14

² Numbers 25

³ Joshua 11:11 (LXX)

⁴ Acts 13:22

⁵ 1 Samuel 17

⁶ 1 Kings 18

Paul explained to the Roman assembly that those who “walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised” will obtain a just standing before God. Abraham’s example of faith by boldly pursuing the Kings of Sodom is no less impressive than his faith when he left Ur to go to the promised land, or even when he took Isaac up on Mt Moriah to sacrifice him. Furthermore, after Abraham slaughtered the Kings, we find him being blessed by this mysterious character named “Melchizedek.”⁷ He then shared a meal of bread and wine which are the very two elements that Jesus used to inaugurate the New Covenant with His disciples! Just as Abraham Job lived before the Law and also used violence in his righteous behavior. God regarded Job as “none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil”⁸ and we find that part of Job’s righteous character he demonstrated involved the use of violence.

Job 29:7-17

⁷ *When I went out to the gate by the city, When I took my seat in the open square,*

⁸ *The young men saw me and hid, And the aged arose and stood;*

⁹ *The princes refrained from talking, And put their hand on their mouth;*

¹⁰ *The voice of nobles was hushed, And their tongue stuck to the roof of their mouth.*

¹¹ *When the ear heard, then it blessed me, And when the eye saw, then it approved me;*

¹² ***Because I delivered the poor who cried out, The fatherless and the one who had no helper.***

¹³ *The blessing of a perishing man came upon me, And I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy.*

¹⁴ *I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; My justice was like a robe and a turban.*

¹⁵ *I was eyes to the blind, And I was feet to the lame.*

¹⁶ *I was a father to the poor, And I searched out the case that I did not know.*

¹⁷ ***I broke the fangs of the wicked, And plucked the victim from his teeth.*** (NKJV)

Just like Abraham Job did not idly sit by and watch the Wicked harm the innocent but took violent action to defend and protect them. A call to God’s servants to physically protect the weak and innocent from the Wicked is a common theme.

Psalm 82:4 LXX

4 Rescue the needy, and deliver the poor out of the hand of the sinner.

⁷ In Hebrews chapter 7 Paul regarded Moses’ comments about Melchizedek to be exactly like what was later revealed concerning the “Son of God” in the Psalms, including Psalm 2 and Psalm 110.

⁸ Job 1:8

Proverbs 24:11 LXX

11 Rescue the ones being led unto death, and redeem the ones being slaughtered. Do not delay!

Isaiah 1:17 LXX

17 learn to do good; seek judgment; rescue the one who is being harmed; defend the orphan, and do justice to the widow.

Jeremiah 22:3 LXX

This is what the YHVH says: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one having been seized from the hand of one who is doing him wrong. And do not oppress, and do not act ungodly against a guest and orphan and widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

Now, where does this precept to defend the innocent from the Wicked originate? It comes from the Noahic Covenant.

Genesis 9:1-17 NKJV

¹ So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. ² "And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand. ³ "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. ⁴ "But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵ "**Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man.** ⁶ "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.⁷ And as for you, be fruitful and multiply; Bring forth abundantly in the earth And multiply in it." ⁸ Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: ⁹ "And as for Me, behold, I establish **My covenant** with you and with your descendants after you, ¹⁰ "and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. ¹¹ "Thus I establish **My covenant** with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹² And God said: "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: ¹³ "I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of **the covenant** between Me and the earth. ¹⁴ "It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; ¹⁵ "and I will remember **My covenant** which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ "**The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I**

will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”¹⁷ And God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

V5-6 sets the foundation for all civilization, human government, systems of justice and self-defense. It also is a Covenant that applies to ALL nations. No human government existed at the time God made this Covenant so this authority was given to INDIVIDUALS. In fact, all systems of law and justice are really just a collective organization of the individual right of every person to protect themselves, their family, or others. This Covenant also has no expiration date. As long as a rainbow appears in the sky this Covenant applies. In the Jerusalem council, we find the Apostles discussing how the nations are to relate to the Law of Moses. They decided to not impose the commands of the Law of Moses on the nations and wrote them a letter to inform them of this. In their instruction to the nations coming to faith in Christ they appealed to the Noahic Covenant:

Acts 15:28-29 NKJV

²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:

*²⁹ that you abstain from things offered to idols, **from blood**, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.*

The command in V29 to abstain from eating blood is a quotation from Genesis 9:4. The nations were instructed that the specific dietary instructions commanded in the Law of Moses⁹ were not binding on them but the Noahic command to abstain from eating blood was still in effect. It follows then that the other elements contained in the Noahic Covenant still apply under the New Covenant dispensation. The inherent right of self-defense and the use of violence to protect others was understood by Jesus' disciples. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane two of His disciples asked Him “*Lord, shall we strike with the sword?*”¹⁰ Peter being one of them did not even wait for Jesus' response but took it upon himself to defend Jesus by striking Malchus and cutting off his ear. Now the Pacifist will point to this account in the Gospels and Jesus' statement to Peter in Matthew “*for all who take the sword will perish by the sword*”¹¹ as proof for their position yet this very account undermines this premise. Why were the disciples “*packing heat*” in the first place? Surly Jesus' Pacifist teachings for the last 3.5

⁹ Leviticus 11

¹⁰ Luke 22:49

¹¹ Matthew 26:52

years would have caused the disciples to discard any weapons of violence yet not only were they carrying them but were willing and able to use them. Jesus made it clear that this was not a situation that warranted such a response but he did not tell Peter to get rid of his sword but rather to sheath it. Jesus' told his disciples "permit even this"¹² because it was against the Father's will for violence to be used in this situation. Situational awareness for the use of violence is very important for Christians to consider. Discernment is required for the right time to take action and the right time to yield. There is a proper time for everything. Solomon understood this:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 NKJV

¹ *To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven:*

² *A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted;*

³ ***A time to kill, And a time to heal;** A time to break down, And a time to build up;*

⁴ *A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance;*

⁵ *A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing;*

⁶ *A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away;*

⁷ *A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak;*

⁸ *A time to love, And a time to hate; **A time of war, And a time of peace.***

Jesus' words "for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" applied to the situation that concerned persecution for the Faith. This is exactly how John understood Jesus' statement when he quoted from it in Revelation.

Revelation 13:7-10 NKJV

⁷ *It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. ⁸ All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. ⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear. ¹⁰ He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; **he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword.** Here is the patience and the faith of the saints.*

Christians who resist persecution from the Antichrist with violence will die by that same violence. When a Christian's life is threatened by persecution for their faith it is God's will to respond with Pacifism but even in these types of situations, there can still be grounds for Christians to appeal to the Law of the Land in their defense.¹³ When a

¹² Luke 22:51

¹³ Acts 22:25

Christian's life is threatened on account of their faith and they respond with pacifism they become a "Martyr". The term "Martyr" originated in the sphere of legal trials. A "Martyr" refers to a legal witness who gives personal testimony to certain facts or truths. It was later applied to Christians who were killed for the sake of Christ. They willingly allowed the threat to their own life in order to bear witness and give personal testimony to the veracity of Jesus' teachings. Jesus laid down his life as "*The True and Faithful Martyr*"¹⁴ testifying to the Truth He received from the Father. When Christians are persecuted for their faith, they are called to follow this example¹⁵ but a Christian who suffers violence inflicted by a common criminal is not commanded to become a doormat and allow their life or the life of those around them to be taken without resistance. The criminal is not motivated to harm them on account of their faith nor has any personal knowledge of their faith. Therefore, the Christian is not a "witness" (*martyr*) in this situation and is fully justified in using self-defense. This is evident in the fact that Jesus not only allowed His disciples to carry self-defense weapons but even commanded them to do so. Just before Jesus' arrest, He gave His disciples these commands:

Luke 22:35-38 NKJV

³⁵ And He said to them, "When I sent you without money bag, knapsack, and sandals, did you lack anything?" So they said, "Nothing." ³⁶ Then He said to them, "But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a knapsack; and **he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one.**³⁷ "For I say to you that this which is written must still be accomplished in Me: 'And He was numbered with the transgressors.' For the things concerning Me have an end." ³⁸ So they said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." And He said to them, "**It is enough.**"

Notice that Peter¹⁶ and another disciple were already carrying swords.¹⁷ Jesus' command¹⁸ "*he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one*" is given to the other ten who were not carrying swords. The overall context regarding "*swords*" was about Jesus' future command for sending forth His disciples with the Great Commission. They were commanded to buy a sword to carry with them, along with a money bag,

¹⁴ Revelation 1:5, 3:14

¹⁵ 1Peter 2:21-23

¹⁶ John 18:10. Peter and another disciple also had these "daggers" on them while observing The Passover with Jesus.

¹⁷ The Greek word μάχαιρα refers to a dagger, which was typically a self-defense weapon being a single-edged blade used for "cutting" type movements. Different from what we would typically call a "sword"- a double-edged military weapon used for offensive purposes.

¹⁸ Greek-Imperative Mood

knapsack, and sandals which they were not commanded to bring when they were sent out to their brethren the Jews.¹⁹ The reason for the change was that He was about to send them into foreign lands which had many dangers like robbers lying in wait for travelers along the roads.²⁰ Jesus' quote in v37 from Isaiah 53:12 was a reference to the two thieves who would be crucified along with him as Mark's Gospel records.²¹ "For" in v37 refers to the new situation that would arise after these prophecies were fulfilled and they were then sent out to evangelize the nations. The "swords" topic was concerning this new situation that would arise. Some translations in v38 have "they are enough" referring to the two swords the disciples presented but the grammar will not allow this interpretation.²² In the clause, "it is enough," "it" is singular and cannot have a plural antecedent (the 2 swords). Jesus was essentially telling His disciples "that is enough" about the discussion concerning swords. So, with all this in mind what primary text do Pacifists use to bolster their claim? The text most often cited is found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:38-39 NKJV

³⁸ *You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'*

³⁹ *"But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*

The Pacifist argues that the use of self-defense would be "resisting" the evil person. "Turning the other cheek" is also usually applied to a violent attack where the attacker should be allowed unlimited access to harm their body. On the surface, it is easy to understand how someone who approaches this text with a Pacifist predisposition can arrive at this conclusion but this approach ignores the context. Jesus is quoting from the OT in this passage. In order to make sense of the NT a thorough understanding of the OT is required, especially the OT texts that Jesus and the Apostles quote to make their point. Only after we first understand the OT quotation in the proper context in which it was given can we then make a NT application. In this passage, Jesus is quoting from the Law of Moses.²³ Not only is Jesus quoting directly from various Scriptures in the Law

¹⁹ Matthew 10:1-16

²⁰ Luke 10:30

²¹ Mark 15:26-28

²² The clause is ἰκανόν ἐστιν (it/that is enough). Both the subject (the adjective ἰκανόν - "enough") and the verb (ἐστιν "it is") are singular in number. If this clause referred to the "two swords" the adjective and the verb would have to be plural, since they must agree with the referent in number. Jesus would have said "they are enough" not "it/that is enough." The singular adjective and verb require that the referent (whether stated or implied) must be singular.

²³ Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21

but He is also indirectly quoting from the Law by using the same terminology. For example, when Jesus says:

Matthew 5:39

μη ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ

*Do not take a **stand against** an **evil person***

He is using the same terms found in Deuteronomy 19:18-19. (LXX)

V 18 καὶ ἐξετάσωσιν οἱ κριταὶ ἀκριβῶς καὶ ἰδοὺ μάρτυς ἄδικος ἐμαρτύρησεν ἄδικα ἀντέστη κατὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ

*and if the judges make a thorough inquiry and, look, an unjust witness has testified unjustly, he has **stood up against** his brother*

V19 καὶ ποιήσετε αὐτῷ ὃν τρόπον ἐπονηρεύσατο ποιῆσαι κατὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐξαρεῖς τὸν πονηρὸν ἐξ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν

*then you shall do to him just as he wickedly devised to do to his brother. And you shall remove the **evil person** from yourselves.*

In the context of these passages from the Law, the situation pertains to how justice is served between two parties **AFTER** an offense occurs. It pertains to the legal situation after the infraction when it is in the power of the offended party to impose punishment.²⁴ Under the Law, the punishment enacted by the offended party should be equal to that of the offense: “*life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*” It has absolutely nothing to do with an action taken **WHILE** the offense occurs neither does it have anything to do with the issue of self-defense. The Mosaic covenant allowed the offended party to get legal retribution for the harm done to them by their offender. The New Covenant has a different standard. Christians are to extend mercy and grace to their offender and not impose the legal punishment on them after they have been wronged. This is what Jesus is referring to when he commands His disciples to not “*resist*” an evil person. Christians are to refrain from “*taking a stand against*”²⁵ the wrongdoer in court verbally.²⁶ Furthermore, this is also what it means to “*turn the other cheek.*” One party slapping the other party on the cheek was a common practice in legal proceedings in ancient Mediterranean culture. This practice was not intended to inflict pain but rather to

²⁴ Exodus 21:22

²⁵ ἀντίστημι from the preposition ἀντί “against” and verb ἵστημι “to stand”

²⁶ ἀντίστημι appears numerous times in the context of verbal resistance to someone’s testimony (Deuteronomy 19:18 LXX Luke 21:14-15, Acts 6:10, Acts 13:8, Galatians 2:11, 2 Timothy 4:15)

humiliate as an insult.²⁷ Again, this is all in the context of a legal proceeding where charges are decided. The purpose behind Jesus' command to Christians to respond this way when they are brought to court is ultimately to reflect God's character. Jesus knew that His disciples would face much adversity living in a society under Roman occupation which was very hostile to Christianity. His disciples would be confronted with many situations in which they were going to be treated unjustly due to their faith. Christians responding with pacificism in public arenas towards their offenders when they had the power legally to impose retribution was a demonstration of God's love and mercy. This is why Jesus followed this command with the command to:

"love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you"

Responding in these ways when being treated unjustly on account of the Faith reflects the character of the God we advance. As God's representatives, we are to reflect all His attributes. This not only includes His mercy and grace but also His justice. Refusing to physically protect the weak from the Wicked when it is in the power to do so fails to display God's justice. Just as it would negatively reflect God's character to the society for the Apostles to have physically combated their persecutors it would equally be wrong to passively allow the weak to be physically harmed by a wicked criminal. Having an equally rounded view of God's character concerning this topic is crucial. The Jesus who passively allowed Himself to be unjustly tried, beaten and crucified by the Wicked is the same Jesus who aggressively brandished a whip to physically remove the Wicked from the temple.²⁸ Christians involved in occupations where violence may occur are not in violation of Jesus' commands. Especially Christians who are in civil service occupations. Paul informs us that all legitimate governments are ordained by God to be His "*minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.*"²⁹ This is why neither John the Baptist nor Jesus nor the Apostles condemned soldiers to leave their occupation even when some of these Roman soldiers asked specifically what they should do regarding the Faith.³⁰ Many Soldiers throughout history have functioned in their occupation while remaining loyal to Jesus. A powerful example of this is a group known as the "*Thundering Legion.*" This was a unit that had 40 Roman soldiers who were Christians stationed at Sebaste, Armenia in AD320. Licinius was the emperor of the eastern part of Rome and was hostile towards Christians. He made an edict that

²⁷ Job 16:10, 1Kings 22:24, Matthew 26:67, Mark 14:65, John 18:22

²⁸ John 2:15

²⁹ Romans 13:4

³⁰ Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 3:14, Luke 7:1-10, Acts 10

commanded all Roman soldiers to offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods under the threat of death. These Soldiers refused to do so. Their response to the edict said:

"You threaten fearful torments and call our godliness a crime, but you will not find us faint-hearted or attached to this life or easily stricken with terror. For the love of God, we are prepared to endure any kind of torture"

Agricola who commanded the legion was enraged. He stripped the 40 soldiers of their armor until they were naked then forced them all out onto a frozen lake informing them that they can come ashore when they are ready to deny the Faith. He had fires built onshore with warm baths, blankets, clothing, and hot food to tempt them. Sadly, one of the soldiers apostatized and left the ice renouncing Christ to seek warmth. The other 39 remained. One centurion named Aglaius who was observing onshore was moved by his comrades' faith in Christ. He decided to strip himself naked and join them on the ice professing, *"I am a Christian."* The 40 soldiers huddled together in fervent prayer as they froze to death on that lake. If these soldiers were willing to die rather than deny Christ, and if they believed Christ commanded pacifism, they would certainly have abandoned the army and accepted the consequences. Likewise, they could have easily taken up their swords and fought the edict. But they all understood the Sermon on the Mount, and the distinction between righteous violence and passivity when persecuted for the Faith.

It is no different today. Christians must only use violence to protect the innocent, and always be willing and ready to lay down the sword when Christian persecution comes. Unfortunately, violence will remain part of this world system until *"The Man comes Around"*³¹ to judge the nations and they *"beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks."*³²

³¹ Lyrics from a Johnny Cash song about the return of Christ

³² Revelation 19:11-16, Isaiah 2:4, Joel 3:10, Micah 4:3