

## At The Core of Christianity

The newspaper reports that in recent months, one million people in America bought a gun who didn't previously own one. Many of these people are church-goers. Why do they want to have a gun? Why does *anyone* want to have a gun? The purpose of a gun is not to aggrandize the ego of their owners – although undoubtedly guns do that. Guns are not to make threats; they are not to cause wounds. They are for one purpose, and that is to kill. So why all this interest now in guns? In the past, it was common thinking among conservatives and Christians that having guns would protect against government agents coming to take away our property or our freedoms. I don't think that's the issue right now. I think it's quite obvious why there's this renewed interest in gun-ownership: The recent riots in many of our nation's cities threaten us personally, so we think having a gun will protect our property and our families. Whether you, dear reader, own guns or not, let's think for several minutes about guns, about killing other people.

If we're saved by God's grace thru the Gospel, what are our two great obsessions or, if they're not, what *should be* our two great obsessions? Isn't it personal Christ-likeness and winning others to Christ? Of course, there are other ways of expressing these ideals, and there may even be other answers to consider as well. But these two are undeniably biblical priorities of the highest order. Let's stipulate that these two are the most important matters for a believer. So, where do guns fit in?

First, let's look at Scripture:

*"By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you ...though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:1-4).*

In our study of 2 Corinthians, we discussed how Paul eschewed fancy rhetoric, ingenuity, charisma, and other vainglorious displays of power, preferring instead to rely on God's word to change hearts. He certainly didn't brandish a knife or wave a spear! He trusted in God to win his battles for him. And he even disclosed the rationale for this approach in verse 1. Paul was imitating the Son, who submitted to the violence His enemies inflicted on Him, trusting in the Father to vindicate Him at the proper time and manner. Christ didn't fight off the Romans, though He could have; instead, he submitted to them, even though it meant suffering unspeakably horrible agonies and death. In weakness, Christ triumphed over death, over His enemies, over Satan himself – by the power of God. This is foundational to understanding the Gospel.

To the pagan mind, humility is a weakness and weakness is something to be despised. Only power matters. And death is the ultimate weakness. Power over others, however it's obtained, is greatness. Power means authority. That's why guns! A hand pointing a gun at someone is a display of immense power. "Do as I say or you're dead!" The gun gives us power over others. In a confrontation with others intent on harm, the gun means we necessarily prevail, and those others lose. The person wielding a gun is determined not to be weak, not to be Christ-like in humility, but to exercise power. Even if it means killing that other person – after all, no one ever points a loaded gun at another person without the possibility of actually killing that other. What else is the gun for?

*"Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand...against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil ...Therefore put on the full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:10-12).*

Paul is essentially saying here that we have totally different set of values than pagans do. We have a totally different mind-set and a totally different world-view because we're totally different people. We trust in God to vindicate us, we trust in God to raise us from the dead, to reward us, and to bless us. We know that He's the sovereign Ruler of the cosmos, so that whatever happens to us in life is by His permission and for our good. We therefore submit to the bad things that happen in life knowing that God one future day will not only comfort us but recompense us for trusting Him. Paul says, "I die daily." He says, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." And he hopes that Christ will be exalted in his body, whether by life or by death: "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:20-21). Paul –

and we, as well – need to embrace death as the opportunity of a lifetime, to go into the presence of the exalted Jesus. Why then do we need or want guns? Perhaps we aren't certain of the promise of resurrection after all.

*“And take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17).*

Our weapon is not a gun, not ever. It's the Word of God. It's the gospel. It's the Spirit of God using Scripture. Confronted by a hostile mob, our defense is to preach Christ. And our offensive stance is to preach Christ. Whether defense or offense – it doesn't matter. If the Gospel doesn't lead to their conversion, and the mob kills us, we are, in God's mind, “overcomers.” It doesn't get any better than that! (See Revelation 2:7,11,17,26 and 3:5,12,21.) And if the Gospel *does* lead to their conversion, we're blessed by having new brothers and sisters serving with us. Isn't that our obsession?

*“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven...be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matthew 5:44-48).*

Jesus here is not merely asking us to show mercy to others – although He is certainly commanding that here. It's more. “Love your enemies” is what underlies and is the whole basis for salvation. It's what led God to send the Son. It's what caused the Son to go to the cross. It's what leads the Spirit to open our hearts to believe the Gospel. We all are God's enemies. Every human being. Our sin nature, our spirit of rebellion, our carnality, our submission to Satan's authority, our worldliness – everything about us is inimical to God. Yet He loves us! So when we love our enemies – instead of shooting them dead – we are expressing God's nature, or character. We are the image of God. We are Christ-like and perfect. Isn't that our obsession also?

This is big. It's major, exceedingly important. In the Bible, a son is just like his father. If we love our enemies, those who seek to harm us, then we're demonstrating that we're God's [adopted] sons. We're born again and in union with Christ when we love those who hate us, who persecute us, who try to kill us. It's not a profession of faith or our church attendance that reveals who we really are. After all, words are cheap. And pagans can attend church. It's our obedience to Christ, to His Words and to His will, that demonstrate whether our faith is real. (See James chapter 2.)

Here are a few examples of faith that embraces weakness: In the jungles of Colombia, FARC guerrillas murdered the pastor of a church. His widow then was threatened also. She could stay and continue to minister to their church, and also be killed. Or she could leave the jungle and go to the city where she'd be safe. And she said this, “In this world, I'm a nobody. But if Christ is allowing me the privilege of dying for Him, then I'm not a nobody, I'm an overcomer. I'll stay. It's up to God if I die or not.”

And from Buddhist Nepal comes this testimony by a young woman, as reported to VOM: “If Christ suffered for me and gave His life for me, then this [threat of being beaten to death by her father-in-law because she became a Christian] is a privilege for me to suffer for Him. Even if I die here, it doesn't matter because eternal life is secured for me. I felt privileged to suffer for Christ.” She was struck repeatedly on the head, but didn't die from the blows.

In Viet Nam today Christian young people motorcycle up into the hills with Bibles to distribute to the Hmong people, knowing that, if caught, they will be imprisoned where they possibly would die. They go up into the hills anyway. And they don't carry guns. It's been estimated that 10 Christians somewhere in the world are killed every day because of their identification with Christ and refusal to deny Him. They are living out Jesus' words, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:24). They willingly take up a cross and follow Christ, meaning being willing to die, an expression of godly weakness.

In Matthew 10, Jesus sent His disciples out on mission. Sending them, He warned them that mission and persecution are inseparable. And they went. We're all on mission too. We're here to reach out to others with the Gospel so that they also can be saved from hell and enjoy eternal life in God's presence. Shooting another person dead in order to protect ourself deprives that person from ever embracing Christ. It necessarily consigns that person to hell. What is of greatest importance to us? Saving our life, or saving the lives of others?

In all likelihood, there's some disagreement about this lesson. Maybe someone will argue, "If people are intent on mayhem or murder, on doing evil, I'm carrying out God's judgment on them with my gun. God told Israel to annihilate the Canaanites because of their wickedness. Anti-social behavior has consequences." But this isn't biblical. It's simply the attempt to rationalize pagan thinking. In this era, we're God's servants to love, not to judge. God alone has the right to judge and condemn, and to punish. He has delegated this authority to civil servants (Romans 13), not to individuals. (Discipline within the church is another matter altogether.)

Someone else may say, "It's my right as an American citizen to own guns. I'm exercising my rights." But it's also an American's right to kill a pre-born baby, to marry someone of the same sex, and to burn the American flag. Just because we have these civil rights, put there by human wisdom, doesn't mean we have to exercise them. Paul had a right as a Roman citizen not to be jailed without a trial and indictment. He refused to exercise that right in Philippi (Acts 16). Instead, he trusted in God to work His will, and Paul got to experience a miraculous deliverance and the salvation of the jailer. More important to Paul than his "rights" were being Christ-like in weakness, depending entirely on the power of God. A follower of Christ has a more ultimate citizenship that requires submission to the Spirit of Christ.

Perhaps someone will say this, "It's courageous to confront a mob. I'm no coward. I just need to be compelling. That's why I have a gun." But it's not courageous to go into a dangerous situation without a specific promise from God of protection. It's foolishness. Jesus said, "I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). A serpent avoids confrontation; it will slither away from danger and hide. To be wise as serpents means to know when to flee. "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another" (10:23). A dove was an animal for sacrifice at the altar. To be harmless as a dove means to be so submissive that dying is preferable to fighting back and causing another harm.

Or someone might say, "My gun is to protect my house and possessions." This is appalling! Are material possessions so precious to us that we'd kill to keep them from being stolen or destroyed? Ah, but perhaps the gun is only to *scare* mobs away. And if the mob doesn't scare? Would a Christian actually shoot someone dead to protect his TV set? Or his house or car? Or if the mob *is* scared away, what Christian testimony is it, that we'd threaten to use lethal force to protect possessions we're so in love with? Having a gun in the house (or carrying one) speaks volumes about what it is that we really love. The gun says, "I don't want to suffer loss." Paul says (Phil 3:7ff), "I count all things as loss for the greatness of knowing Christ." And the Spirit says, be like Paul.

Even more likely, someone will say, "My gun is to protect *my family*. It's to protect people I love." This sounds OK at first. But it means, to protect a life, we shoot someone else dead. Is using a gun really the only option? Isn't there a back door thru which to flee? Hey, to protect the Jews we're hiding in the attic, do we tell lies? Is telling a lie really the only option? Ethical issues aren't easy; they require careful analysis and forethought. May we all think through now, in advance, with the Scriptures in front of us, how we'll respond when the day of testing comes. If the day comes, or if it never comes, let's trust God with a radical trust, a biblical trust, something that pagans know nothing of.

But the biggest objection to this lesson is probably this: "It's none of your business if I own guns. You're meddling in my personal life." Yes, that's right! As Sunday School teacher, it's my responsibility to teach the Scriptures. The Bible says, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." A follower of Christ is not here to live as he or she pleases, according to natural wisdom. We live instead according to supernatural wisdom, i.e., the Scriptures. And the Word is a treasure-chest of understanding for what we're to value, how we're to think and act, and how we're to be. Gun ownership, therefore, like everything else in life, has to be controlled by the Word of God. This lesson is really about what's central to Christianity, which the issue of gun ownership dramatically highlights: our obedience to God's Word as we apply it to life matters, and our personal character imitating that of Christ.

Now, a conclusion. We're called to be mature believers. That means we obey Christ's words and will in all that's in Scripture, and if a situation is not in Scripture we use Scriptural principles to discern His will. So Scripture informs us that guns are for pagans. If in all things God works for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8), so that we may be glorified and that we may glorify Christ, then let's put aside fears of mobs or of suffering losses, and obsess instead over carrying out the mission that God lovingly privileged us with. And being like Christ, the suffering Servant.