

**A CHRISTIAN CAN USE LETHAL FORCE
TO STOP A LIFE-THREATENING CRIMINAL ASSAULT**

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Contents

Introduction..... 2

Recognized in the Old Testament 2

Exodus 22:1-4..... 2

Deuteronomy 22:23-27 4

Nehemiah 4:11-17 4

Esther 8-9 4

Affirmed in the New Testament 4

Luke 22:35-38..... 4

Acts 23:12-31 7

Acts 10 8

Alleged Contrary Teaching 8

Do not resist, but turn the other cheek 8

Love your enemies 12

Expect and rejoice in persecution 13

Weapons not of the flesh..... 14

Follow Christ's example in suffering 14

Alleged Contrary Examples 15

Jesus 15

Stephen 15

James the brother of John 16

Church History 16

Conclusion 17

Introduction

Some Christians believe it is sinful for a disciple of Christ to use lethal force against a criminal assailant even when doing so is necessary to prevent him from murdering an innocent person. In their view, one who could prevent a murder by using lethal force is morally obligated to refrain from doing so, and thus to allow the assailant to kill whomever he wishes, because it is not our place to take a human life. We must leave it to God to deal with the situation. I think this is a misunderstanding of God's will.

Not all killing of humans by other humans is prohibited by the command not to murder (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). Some killing has divine warrant. This is obvious from the fact God prescribed capital punishment for a variety of crimes (e.g., Ex. 21; Lev. 20, 24) and commanded the Israelites to wage wars (e.g., Num. 31:1-8; Deut. 20:16-18). The question is whether killing a criminal assailant to prevent him from murdering someone is within the category of morally justified killings. I explain in this paper why I am convinced it is.

Nothing I say should be construed as authorizing or encouraging physical violence that is motivated by a hateful, angry, vengeful, or retaliatory spirit. All such attitudes are contrary to the life of the Spirit (e.g., Mat. 5:39, 44; Rom. 12:14-21). A Christian is to employ lethal force in defense of others or himself only as a last resort, lamenting the fact a fellow human being has made its use necessary to stop a deadly threat. Should that force result in the assailant's death, there may be relief and possibly even joy over the harm that was averted, but it is a sign of spiritual corruption if a human life is taken eagerly or, heaven forbid, with a sense of thrill or pleasure. The killing of a human being cannot be trivialized on the grounds he was evil, for God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 33:11).

Groups that speak cavalierly about killing the "bad guys" and glorify the possibility of doing so, as do some corners of the American gun culture, are not reflecting the nature of God. And groups that enlist God as a lobbyist for gun rights, suggesting he views firearms as sacred and ignoring his sadness regarding the brokenness that their use represents, distort his image before the world. God's allowance of lethal force in limited situations is a concession to human sinfulness, akin to his allowance of divorce. It is not a focal point of his character or his agenda for creation. Most Christians would recognize something was amiss if God's relationship to divorce was celebrated and license plates were issued proclaiming "God & Divorce," yet many have no similar sense when this is done with God and guns.

Recognized in the Old Testament

Exodus 22:1-4

Exodus 22:1-4 states (ESV): *If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.* ² ***If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him,*** ³ ***but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for***

his theft. ⁴ If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double.

Verse 2 assumes the thief is breaking into a house at night¹ to steal animals that were sheltered there and permits the homeowner who catches him to strike him with a lethal blow; he incurs no guilt for doing so. But if the homeowner kills the thief after "the sun has risen on him," probably meaning the next day (or thereafter) when he presumably discovers the thief's identity,² he "is held responsible for the homicide and is vulnerable to blood vengeance (Num. 35.27; Deut. 19.10)."³ In the former case, the killing is done in the face of a potentially deadly threat, an intruder who is concealed by darkness and quite possibly armed with whatever tool he used for digging through the wall. In the latter, there is no such threat. The killing is done merely for punishment or revenge or to effect recovery of the stolen property.

This text establishes clearly the permissibility of using lethal force in self-defense under the old covenant. Mackay summarizes the point: "[I]n the darkness the intruder cannot be identified. It is impossible to see if he has come armed with a life-threatening weapon. Since his intentions are unknown, the house owner has the right to assume the worst and to defend his own life and that of his household."⁴ This is in accord with the ancient Jewish understanding as reflected in the Babylonian Talmud, a sixth-century compilation of Jewish oral tradition. Its commentary on Mishnah-Tractate Sanhedrin 8:6 includes the following:

Said Raba, "What is the reason that the householder may kill one who breaks in? It is because we make the assumption that no one restrains himself when it comes to protecting his property. And this one the thief must have taken the view, 'If I go there, the householder will resist me and not let me take what I want, so if he resists, I shall kill him.' And the Torah has said, 'If he comes to kill you, you kill him first' cf. Exo. 22: 1."

¹ The verb *htr* means to break through or dig through and is used in Job 24:16 to describe illicit entry into a house by digging through the walls. Cornelius Van Dam, "חטר" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:330-331. As John Mackay notes in *Exodus*, Mentor Commentary (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), 383, the related noun that is used in Ex. 22:2 (*mahteret*) refers literally to a "digging through," which is "a not inappropriate way of describing a forced entry through walls built using dried mud bricks." The nighttime element is implied by the fact thieves typically break into homes under cover of darkness (e.g., Job 24:16; Mat. 24:43) and by the contrast between the sun having risen on the thief and his being found breaking in.

² Regarding this interpretation of the phrase, William H. C. Propp states in *Exodus 19-40*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 240, "if a day has passed, then to kill the burglar would be a crime of cold blood not self-defense." If one understands the phrase "if the sun has risen on him" to refer to a daylight break-in, as many do, the distinction in guilt for killing the thief presumably is because one can be more measured in responding to the threat when one can see, one can assume the perpetrator in that circumstance did not expect anyone to be home and thus was interested only in stealing and not murdering, and/or because one can identify the thief and thus need not be as concerned with trying to detain him. But the point still stands that killing him during a nighttime break-in is expressly sanctioned by God. Jews traditionally understood the phrase metaphorically as meaning "If the burglar's intentions are plainly nonviolent." David B. Kopel, *The Morality of Self-Defense and Military Action: The Judeo-Christian Tradition* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), 12.

³ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 474.

⁴ Mackay, 383.

Deuteronomy 22:23-27

This right of defense against a criminal assault is confirmed elsewhere in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 22:23-27 addresses the case where a man engages in sexual intercourse with a virgin who is betrothed to another man. If the encounter happened in the city, both the man and the woman are executed because it is assumed the woman would have cried out (and been heard because of the population density) if she did not consent. But if the encounter happened in the countryside, only the man is executed because it is assumed the woman did indeed cry out for help (i.e., it was rape) but "there was no one to rescue her" (v. 27).

Verse 27 shows there was an expectation that someone who heard a woman being raped would come to her rescue, would prevent the assault from occurring or continuing. If the rapist was determined to carry out the assault and attacked the rescuer to thwart his effort to prevent it, certainly it is implied that the rescuer could respond with whatever force was necessary to effect the rescue. Allowing the rape to proceed by refusing to deliver the lethal blow necessary to halt it is a *failure* to rescue, the opposite of what is being contemplated.

Nehemiah 4:11-17

In Nehemiah 4 the Jews rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem were being threatened by their neighbors, the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites. They were plotting to kill the Jews to stop their work (v. 11). Nehemiah stationed in strategic locations people who were armed with swords, spears, and bows to protect against the assault. In v. 14 he instructs them to "fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes." After that immediate threat subsided, half the workers were equipped with spears and bows and those who carried loads did so with a weapon in their free hand (vv. 16-17). This assumes a right of defense against violent criminal attack. The attempt to limit this example to defense from attacks made on those engaging in work tied to God's purpose for Israel is dubious in light of Ex. 22:2 and the lack of any indication that some special justification is necessary.

Esther 8-9

The reversal of policy procured by Esther was that Jews in every city were allowed by the Persian political authority to use deadly force in defending themselves against the scheduled attacks from their enemies in the society (Est. 8:10-12). The Jews killed many thousands of their enemies as a result and did so without compunction (Est. 9:5-10, 15-16). On the contrary, the feast celebrating that deliverance, the Feast of Purim, is enshrined in scripture in the Book of Esther (Est. 9:17-32) and has been celebrated in Judaism ever since.

Affirmed in the New Testament

Luke 22:35-38

The new covenant instituted by Christ did not do away with the right of self-defense revealed in the Old Testament. Not only did Jesus allude to Ex. 22:2 without revision (Mat.

24:43; Lk. 12:39), he endorsed the right of self-defense implicitly in Lk. 22:35-38. That text states (ESV): *And he said to them, "When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "Nothing." 36 He said to them, "But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. 37 For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' For what is written about me has its fulfillment." 38 And they said, "Look, Lord, here are two swords." And he said to them, "It is enough."*

Clearly Jesus is drawing a contrast between how things were when he previously sent them out (Lk. 9:2-3; 10:3-4) and how things will be in the time to come, the time when the world's hostility is focused on him in fulfillment of Scripture. Formerly, the disciples could depend on a warm welcome from a sufficient number of people that there was no need for them to take what was necessary to provide for themselves. Now, however, they will no longer be able to depend on that. Instead they will face hostility and persecution, which means they must be prepared to meet their own needs.

The difficulty is in how to understand the command for the one not having a sword (or dagger – *machaira*) to buy one and how to understand Jesus' response in v. 38 to the statement that they have two swords. Most commentators suggest that when Jesus tells the disciples to buy a sword he is using it merely as a symbol of their need to prepare for pressure not as a literal command for them to purchase a weapon. But as Rodney Decker notes, "This appears to be based, not on the context, but on a precommitment to a pacifist position. Once one assumes that Jesus 'eschews all violence,' then any contrary conclusions must be 'adjusted' to fit the preconceived conclusion."⁵

The claim that "sword" is here being used metaphorically is most unlikely. Jesus tells them to buy a sword in the same way he tells them to take a moneybag and knapsack. The latter items clearly are literal accoutrements of ancient travel, so it is special pleading to insist that the sword is metaphorical. Indeed, a sword was common equipment for travelers in the Roman world⁶ and the disciples understood Jesus to be referring to a literal sword as demonstrated by the fact they produced two of them.

The Lord's point is that the disciples will become pariahs after his impending condemnation and thus will no longer enjoy broad hospitality from others when traveling. This change will require them to be more self-sufficient (to take a moneybag and knapsack) and to be equipped to protect themselves from the violent criminals to which they will be increasingly

⁵ Rodney J. Decker, "Self-Defense and the Christian," 8, accessed on 11/9/18 at https://biblefacultysummit.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Decker_Self-Defense-and-the-Christian-Article-Fac-Forum-Decker-April-2014.pdf.

⁶ S. Brian Pounds states in "A Reply to Dale Martin's JSNT Essay (Part 1)," accessed on 11/9/18 at <http://historicaljesusresearch.blogspot.com/2014/09/a-reply-to-dale-martins-jsnt-essay-part.html>:

Roman legal codes and narrative accounts from various periods often convey the right of individuals to bear and use arms for protection, particularly in cases of travelers defending themselves against bandits (e.g. Twelve Tables 8.13; Cicero *Mil.* 11; Cod. *justin.* 3.27.1; 9.16.3 Dig. 43.16.3.9; Apuleius *Metam.* 8.16–18).

This is a fact recognised by many studies dealing with Roman criminal law and penal practice (R. Baumann, *Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome*, 39; J. Harries, *Law and Crime in the Roman World*, 113; O. F. Robinson, *The Criminal Law of Ancient Rome*, 42, 45).

exposed (to take a sword).⁷ As outcasts, they would be more likely to find themselves in dangerous situations, especially at night, and being without a sword would leave them defenseless and even invite attack. John Nolland notes, "The sword is thought of as part of the equipment required for the self-sufficiency of any traveler in the Roman world. Nothing more than protection of one's person is in view."⁸

In v. 38 Jesus is saying that the two swords they possess among them are adequate for the limited purpose of self-defense which he authorized. That number would, of course, not be sufficient for waging any kind of offensive military campaign, something of which Jesus would disapprove. Decker comments, "Jesus does not rebuke them for having these swords, but he does indicate that two were apparently adequate for the group of twelve (ἰκανόν ἐστίν, 'it is enough,' v. 38b); not everyone need be armed, but some should be."⁹

It is barely possible that the disciples misunderstood Jesus to be suggesting that they should collect weapons for an offensive military campaign, and Jesus responded by saying, in essence, "It is enough [of such nonsense]," thus shutting down and rebuking further discussion in that direction. But there is no contextual warrant for reading that into the disciples' response, and it is doubtful whether there is linguistic support for the notion that "it is enough" can function as the equivalent of "drop it."¹⁰ In any event, it still leaves Jesus prescribing the purchase of a sword for self-defense. What he rejects in that understanding is the notion that his mission is to be accomplished through violent revolution.

Jesus obviously was not mandating that the disciples disarm, as though possessing a sword was inherently contrary to discipleship. If he were, Peter would not have had the sword with which he later struck Malchus, the high priest's servant (Mat. 26:51; Mk. 14:47; Lk. 22:50; Jn. 18:10). The wrong in that case was not that he possessed a sword for self-defense against a criminal assault but that he used it proactively against the proper governing authorities and contrary to Christ's prophesied mission of offering his life as the atoning sacrifice for sins.

Note that after the attack Jesus did not rebuke Peter for having the sword, which he undoubtedly knew beforehand, or tell him to get rid of it. Rather, he told him to put it back into its sheath (Mat. 26:52; Jn. 18:11). Clearly he had no problem with Peter possessing it. The Lord's proverbial observation, "For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mat. 26:52), refers to initiating armed violence, which tends to recoil on its perpetrators. That is different from self-defense, from being the recoil to physical violence that is initiated by others in a criminal attack.

⁷ If Jesus intended the sword to be used only for securing or preparing food or defense against animals, he would need to specify that restriction. Otherwise, its purpose would be understood to include defense against a deadly criminal assault. A *machaira* commonly was used as a weapon against people (e.g., Mark 14:43; Luke 21:24; Acts 12:2; 16:27; Heb 11:37; Rev 13:10) and, as noted by Pounds, was routinely carried by travelers for protection against bandits.

⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 1076.

⁹ Decker, 9.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "ἰκανός" in Gerhard Kittel, ed., trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 3:295. It is noteworthy that Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 472 makes no reference to this alleged idiomatic usage.

Acts 23:12-31

The fact Paul requested and accepted armed military protection against an unlawful plot to kill him (Acts 23:12-31) means he believed it was moral for those soldiers to kill in defense of his life.¹¹ That implies he also believed it was moral for him personally to use lethal force against a persecutor who posed an unlawful deadly threat. After all, he would be killing for the same reason as the soldiers, to prevent his life from being taken unlawfully. The fact he was not a soldier would not distinguish the morality of his action because the soldiers' right to kill in such cases derived from the government's God-given power to use lethal force (Rom. 13:1-7). That same government granted its citizens and subjects a right to kill in self-defense.¹² Indeed, if it was wrong for Paul to use lethal force to defend himself against an unlawful deadly assault, it is hard to understand how he could wash his hands of the wrongdoing by having others carry it out on his behalf

The point applies most commonly today to our reliance on police. Few if any object to someone calling the police to protect himself from a would-be murderer or to the police using lethal force to protect him after they arrive. As Wayne Grudem points out, "If it is morally right to call the police, who would use firearms to protect us in such circumstances, then it seems to me morally right to use a weapon, if necessary, before the police can arrive (not for vengeance, which Rom. 12:9 prohibits, but for self-defense)."¹³ The general acceptance of the use of lethal force by police officers thus is implicit acknowledgment of the morality of self-defense. Erik Raymond observes:

Others may claim that while the government has the power to use the sword to protect its citizens (Rom. 13:1-7), we as ordinary citizens do not. Most people who would hold this view would support the police and military's right to use force (even lethal force) as an application of a passage like Romans 13. However, the Bible does not specify police or military; it simply refers to the government. The state has given the police and military the right to defend its citizens by use of force. In the case of the United States, the government has also given its citizens the right to arm and protect themselves and others in the face of imminent danger. If Christians have no biblical issue with the police and military defending its citizens against attack, then there would not seem to be a biblical case to oppose individual citizens doing the same.¹⁴

¹¹ In Ezra 8:21-23, Ezra was ashamed to ask for military protection because he had painted himself into a corner by guaranteeing the king, without a word from God, that God would protect them on their journey. Having presumptuously rejected the king's troops, they beseeched God for the protection they had claimed, and he graciously provided it.

¹² See, e.g., Jan Arno Hessbruegge, *Human Rights and Personal Self-defense in International Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31 and quote from S. Brian Pounds in footnote 6 above.

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 559.

¹⁴ Erik Raymond, "Should Christians Defend Themselves," accessed on 11/14/18 at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/should-christians-defend-themselves/>.

There is no record of Paul personally defending himself against any violent persecution, but that does not mean he denied there was a right to defend against an unlawful deadly threat. Other factors could explain his lack of defense against certain violent persecutions: some were escapable, some were not life-threatening, and/or some were administered by lawful authorities (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 11:23-27). In other cases, he may not have been armed or for other reasons may not have had a reasonable opportunity for defense.¹⁵ Given his reliance on armed protection in Acts 23:12-31, the Old Testament precedent, and the Lord's instruction about and tolerance of carrying arms, one would need much better evidence to insist that Paul denied a right of self-defense in all situations.

Acts 10

The Roman centurion Cornelius came to faith and was baptized in the name of Jesus Christ in Acts 10. Nothing was said about him needing to leave the Roman army to be a disciple of Christ. This is consistent with the response John the Baptist gave to the soldiers who came to him for baptism and asked what they needed to do. He told them in Lk. 3:14b, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation and be content with your wages." Since Cornelius's duty as a centurion would be expected to involve him in battle and thus in killing,¹⁶ this implies that Christian discipleship is compatible with at least some kinds of killing during war.¹⁷ And if it is compatible with some kinds of killing during war, it may well be compatible with killing to stop an unlawful deadly assault, as the other texts indicate is the case.

Alleged Contrary Teaching

Do not resist, but turn the other cheek

Perhaps the most frequently cited verse in arguing against a right of self-defense is Mat. 5:39, where Jesus instructs the disciples not to resist an evil person and to turn the other cheek.¹⁸

¹⁵ Paul's life clearly was threatened by a physical assault on two occasions: the stoning administered by (or with support of) the crowd at Lystra (Acts 14:19) and the crowd seizing and dragging him out of the temple (Acts 21:27-31, 26:21).

¹⁶ Glen L. Thompson, "Roman Military" in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 992-993.

¹⁷ The claim that the "just war" theory can be traced to and grew out of the shift in the circumstances of Christianity that accompanied Constantine's reign is dubious at best. Darrell Cole says in *When God Says War is Right* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2002), 8, "Such a viewpoint is historically inaccurate and cannot be held with any integrity, given what we now know about early Christian practices." John Helgeland, Robert Daly and J. Patout Burns write in *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 89: "In the first three of the phases we have defined [i.e., prior to Constantine's reign], Christians seem to have regarded the use of military force for the protection of the temporal order as a function proper to the government of the empire. Some served in the army and most accounts of their witness to Christ do not conceal or apologize for their military service to the empire." They further state (p. 90): "Christians seem to have simply accepted warfare as a fact of life in a sinful world. Some exempted themselves from participation on the grounds that it did not belong to the new existence in Christ. Others, in all five phases or periods, seem to have accepted the responsibility for a world that was not yet fully renewed and then took up arms to resist the forces that threatened temporal peace." See also, See J. Daryl Charles, "Pacifists, Patriots or Both? Second Thoughts on Pre-Constantinian Early Christian Attitudes toward Soldering and War," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 17-55.

¹⁸ See also, Lk. 6:29.

Here is the verse in context (Mat. 5:38-42, ESV): *You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'*³⁹ **But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.**⁴⁰ *And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*⁴¹ *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*⁴² *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*

The prescription "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" occurs in several Old Testament texts (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21). It was a principle, commonly known by the Latin phrase *lex talionis* (law of retaliation), that governed Jewish courts in the administration of justice. It meant that the penalty for an offense was to be commensurate with or fit the crime; the penalty was to be neither unduly harsh nor unjustly lenient.

In the first century this principle had been distorted into a justification for acts of personal revenge or retaliation. In other words, people were using it as a license for retribution, as divine permission to exact a "pound of flesh" from those who had wronged them. This was obviously a misapplication of the text, since Lev. 19:18 expressly prohibits taking revenge, but this may have been a popular rather than a rabbinic interpretation.¹⁹ Even in our culture one sometimes hears people cite "an eye for an eye" as justification for acts of personal revenge.

Contrary to the warped notion that the *lex talionis* justified personal revenge or retaliation for offenses, Jesus insists that his disciples, kingdom participants, not *antistēnai* the evildoer (aorist active infinitive of *anthistēmi*). I think the common translation "do not resist" is imprecise and prone to misunderstanding. After all, we are called to "resist" the devil in Jas. 4:7 and 1 Pet. 5:9, and Paul "resisted" Peter's error in Gal. 2:11. It is here better translated something like "do not take a hostile stance against" or "draw up arms against" (HCSB footnote: "don't set yourself against" or "don't retaliate against") an "evildoer" (NRS, NET, HCSB), meaning one who *has done* evil to you. In other words, they are not to allow their mistreatment by someone to create battle-lines and an intention to seek revenge or retaliation from the wrongdoer who is now considered an enemy. They are not to bear a grudge and seek to "get even."

That "do not resist" here involves not retaliating for wrongs is suggested by the contrast of v. 39b. Instead of "resisting" the one who does evil to them, they are to react to that evil by taking it without revenge or retaliation.²⁰ To retaliate would be to resist in the sense he is prohibiting. This is the opposite of the world's attitude which is, "If you wrong me, it's on!" That attitude is summarized in the bumper sticker "I don't get mad – I get even" and in the statement years ago by Donald Trump: "If people screw me, I screw back in spades." The insistence on revenge for personal wrongs is rooted in an inflated ego and in a lack of faith that God ultimately will judge all things.

Jesus then in vv. 39b-41 gives several illustrations of his command not to assume a hostile stance against one who wrongs them, not to turn the wrongdoer into an enemy from whom they demand revenge. In v. 39b he says that instead of drawing up battle-lines against someone who wrongs them, "if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

¹⁹ Charles Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2011), 146-147.

²⁰ This is likewise the point of Paul's admonition in Rom. 12:17 to repay no one evil for evil.

Since most people are right-handed, the fact the slap is on the right cheek implies it was with the back of the hand, which was a gross insult.

He is not talking about whether one can duck or parry such a wrongful, insulting blow, and he certainly is not talking about the ethics of defending oneself against a deadly physical assault. The teaching assumes the insulting blow has already been delivered and addresses one's response. He is saying that a disciple cannot allow such an insult to make him hostile toward the wrongdoer, to turn the wrongdoer into someone the disciple now wants to retaliate against. As Wayne Grudem states:

But Jesus is not prohibiting self-defense here. He is prohibiting individuals from taking personal vengeance simply to "get even" with another person. The verb "slaps" is the Greek term *rhapizo*, which refers to a sharp slap given in insult (a right-handed person would use the back of the hand to slap someone "on the right cheek"). So the point is not to hit back when someone hits you as an insult. But the idea of a violent attack to do bodily harm or even murder someone is not in view here.²¹

The command to offer the other cheek for further wrongful insult is concrete imagery that powerfully conveys the abstract notion of nonretaliation. It is hyperbole, an "over-the-top" picture designed to drive home the commanded attitude and spirit. Imagine if a business owner wanting to stress the importance of satisfying the customer said to his employees, "Clean his toilet if he asks you." Everyone would understand that was hyperbolic, a colorful way of emphasizing the importance of being focused on customer service and satisfaction. No employee would think he was literally being asked to clean customers' toilets. That is the kind of thing Jesus is doing.²²

W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison are among those who recognize that Jesus is here and in the following examples using hyperbole:

The import of the following sentences is lost if one attempts to take them literally. Jesus often resorted to extreme exaggeration in order to drive home his points and to get his hearers to ask questions and see their world from a new perspective. The command to turn the other cheek cannot be understood prosaically. Rather is Jesus calling for an unselfish temperament, for naked humility and a will to suffer the loss of one's personal rights. He is declaring that two wrongs do not make a right, that revenge is poison.²³

In v. 40 Jesus repeats the point saying, "if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." A loin cloth was something like our underwear. A "tunic" was the basic garment, a long or half-sleeved body-length inner robe similar to a nightshirt that was worn

²¹ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 202.

²² Indeed, when Jesus was slapped in Jn. 18:22 he did not literally turn the other cheek but evinced a nonretaliatory spirit in v. 23 by challenging the officer to think so that he might recognize the truth.

²³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 1:541.

in some form by everyone. The "cloak" was the outer robe that protected one from the cold and was used for carrying grain and objects. The cloak was expressly protected from confiscation (Ex. 22:25-27 – cloak taken in pledge must be returned by sunset).

The call to willingly give up the cloak that one has a clear right to keep is a powerful way of making the point that even this kind of personal indignity – being sued for the very clothes on your back – is to be born without hostility, without retaliation or a spirit of revenge. No first-century Jew would understand Jesus' words literally because it would be socially unthinkable for a first-century Jew to go about only in his loin cloth, which would be the result of a literal application in the case of the poor who had only one tunic and cloak. This suggests that the commands about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile likewise are hyperbolic, understood exaggerations that drive home the intended point.

And Jesus again repeats the point in v. 41 where he says, "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." The verb "forces you to go" is a specific term for the Roman soldier's practice of commandeering civilians to carry burdens for them, which was despised by the Jewish people. This was an affront, a being put upon, that invoked outrage and feelings of spite. But Christians are to bear even this offense without hostility and a desire for revenge as pictured in their willingness to go even further than required.

The Lord is not restricting a Christian from standing up for the truth or his legal rights or from defending other people. Paul, for example, resisted Peter to his face in Galatians 2 and stood for his rights as a Roman citizen in Acts 16:37, 22:25, and 25:8-12. The point is that a disciple cannot consider someone an enemy and desire retaliation against him because that person mistreated the disciple.

Thomas Schreiner comments on the hyperbolic nature of these examples:

Believers are not to return insults with insults. Jesus gives colorful and hyperbolic examples to illustrate his teaching. He does not literally mean that one should hand another his cloak if sued, nor were believers required to volunteer to go the extra mile when Roman soldiers commandeered them to go one mile. Jesus' point was that one should not have a heart of revenge and retaliation when mistreated or abused (Matt. 5:40-41). After all, one could literally volunteer to go the extra mile and give everything one owns to a beggar (vv. 41-42) and still have a heart filled with hatred and revenge.²⁴

Having given three illustrations of his command not to turn one who wrongs them into an enemy from whom they demand revenge, Jesus in v. 42 applies the requirement of a nonretaliatory spirit to the disciples' giving to the needy. In that culture, it would be assumed that the needs of those begging and seeking loans were legitimate and probably desperate. Indeed, begging was considered so shameful that some Jews preferred death,²⁵ so Jesus is not addressing the case of the slothful, lazy, or irresponsible.

²⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *40 Questions About Christians and the Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 168.

²⁵ Quarles, 156.

The point in context is that aid to the poor must not be withheld because of personal resentment or animosity based on some kind of prior mistreatment. The fact a person previously had treated them as an enemy does not justify kicking him when he is down by refusing to help him. As Paul said in Rom. 12:20, referring to Prov. 25:21-22, *But "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.*

There is nothing in this teaching that prohibits using lethal force to defend against a murderous criminal assault. That is not what is being discussed.

Love your enemies

It is sometimes alleged that the Lord's command in Mat. 5:44 to love one's enemies and to pray for one's persecutors prohibits the use of lethal force against a deadly criminal assailant, the claim being that killing someone is the opposite of loving them.²⁶ But the Lord did not say to love *only* one's enemies, and once one's duty to love is broadened to those who would be killed or harmed if the assailant were allowed to murder, that duty no longer prohibits taking the assailant's life when necessary to prevent the murder. This is obvious in the case of preventing the murder of third parties. Decker explains:

But which is the more loving act? To defend one's family (or any group of people) by killing a depraved person intent on killing the entire group? Or by "loving" the aggressor and allowing him to kill unchecked, thus taking the life of many people? No, in such cases the most loving thing to do is to stop the attack by any means possible or necessary, even if that means taking the life of the perpetrator.²⁷

But love for others also demands that one consider the impact on them of allowing *oneself* to be killed. One's murder inflicts tremendous grief and a permanent sense of loss on one's spouse, children, grandchildren, other relatives, and friends and deprives them and the larger community of all that one would have contributed had one's life not been taken maliciously. Having murderous intent does not privilege an assailant such that love for him trumps that for all others.

Matthew 5:44 and Lk. 6:27-28 themselves show that submitting to murder is not in view as they contemplate the persecuted disciples' continuing life. The disciple is commanded to pray for, do good to, and bless those who are enemies, haters, and abusers. None of that can be done by one who has allowed himself to be killed.

And note that in God's vision allowing oneself or others to be murdered out of an elevated love for the assailant does not spare the assailant's life. It is God's will that murderers, those who intentionally take a human life without just cause, be put to death by the governing

²⁶ Jesus expressed the point this way in the Sermon on the Plain in Lk. 6:27-28: *"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."* Paul no doubt harks back to this teaching of the Lord when he says in Rom. 12:14, *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."*

²⁷ Decker, 11.

authority (Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21: 12, 14; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35:16-21; Deut. 19:11-12; Rom. 13:1-5). This grant of authority to governments to administer the death penalty is rooted in the sanctity of human life (Gen. 9:5-6; Rom. 13:4). The death penalty is "pro-life" because it affirms that human life is so precious that one who takes it maliciously forfeits his own life. In God's design, allowing the murderer to fulfill his intention does not save his life; he is to be executed. It merely adds innocent people to the death toll.

Expect and rejoice in persecution

Numerous texts tell Christians to expect persecution for their faith and to rejoice in it (e.g., Mat. 5:10-12; Lk. 6:22-23; Jn. 15:20; Acts 14:22; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 2:3, 3:12; Jas. 1:2; 1 Pet. 4:12-19), and others report or refer to their doing so (e.g., Acts 5:41, 16:25; 2 Cor. 12:10; Col. 1:24). But that certainly does not mean Christians are obliged to forego avoiding a deadly assault when it is motivated by anti-Christian hostility, to permit themselves to be killed by persecutors that they may glorify God through it.

As discussed above, Paul in Acts 23:12-31 did not think the gospel required him to allow his life to be taken by a mob, even one that hated him because of his faith in Christ (i.e., was persecuting him). Neither did he believe the gospel required him to die for his faith at the hands of the city governor when he was able to avoid the persecution by fleeing (Acts 9:22-25; 2 Cor. 11:32-33). Christians fled Jerusalem to avoid the persecution that followed the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), the brothers in Jerusalem sent Paul to Tarsus to avoid his being killed for his faith by the Hellenistic Jews (Acts 9:29-30), and Paul and his companions fled Iconium to avoid persecution by the Jews, Gentiles, and their rulers (Acts 14:5-6). This was in keeping with the Lord's instruction in Mat. 10:23. Rejoicing in persecution does not entail submitting to it when one has a moral way out of it.

The question then is whether lethal resistance to an unlawful deadly assault, conduct I have argued is approved by God, becomes sinful if the unlawful assault is motivated by anti-Christian hostility.²⁸ I do not believe it does because if fleeing an unlawful deadly assault does not become sinful when the assault qualifies as persecution, it makes little sense to insist that stopping an unlawful deadly assault by physical force becomes sinful when the assault qualifies as persecution.²⁹ Paul clearly did not think that having a motive of persecution immunized the attacker from lethal resistance (Acts 23:12-31).

But even if one maintains that the persecution motive of the assailant is a dispositive factor in judging the morality of using lethal force in self-defense, that does not negate the

²⁸ By unlawful assault I refer to any attack that is not duly authorized by a proper governing body. State-sponsored persecution is lawful, even if unjust, in that it is an expression of the authority God has vested in governments, authority to which Christians are called to submit (Rom. 13:1-5; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-17), unless, of course, doing so would mean disobeying God (e.g., Acts 5:29). The line of lawfulness is not always clear, especially regarding the individual action of local rulers, but assuming it is morally permissible to flee even lawful persecution, as may be indicated by Joseph's flight to Egypt and Paul's escape from Damascus and Iconium, it does not follow that violent resistance to lawful persecution is permitted. That is insurrection, the antithesis of submission.

²⁹ This is a grave question in this day when Christians and their families are being killed for their faith throughout the world by terrorists. I do not believe God demands that they accept this criminal slaughter when they have the force available to prevent it.

morality of using lethal force in self-defense against nearly all deadly criminal assaults that occur today. Even Grudem, who seems to accept the notion that lethal force cannot rightly be employed in cases of unlawful *persecution*, recognizes that this rationale does not apply to typical criminal attacks.³⁰ He refers to "an irrational, or drug-crazed evil assailant (or gang or mob) whose aggression has nothing to do with opposing our Christian convictions." Indeed, a deadly criminal assailant is almost always motivated by a desire to acquire money, sex, drugs, power, or status or by irrational anger, personal hostility toward the victim, or a desire for excitement.

Weapons not of the flesh

Paul's declaration in 2 Cor. 10:3-4 that "we do not wage war according to the flesh" and "the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly" has nothing to do with whether Christians can use lethal force to stop an unlawful deadly assault. He is speaking metaphorically of the battle for the hearts and minds of the Corinthians. He is not drawing a contrast between literal and metaphorical weapons and saying that Christians can never use the former. Rather, he is drawing a contrast between two kinds of metaphorical weapons, divine and worldly ("fleshly") ways of influencing people, and saying Christians can never use the latter.

Paul's opponents had charged that he and his companions were "walking according to the flesh" (v. 2), probably meaning that the alleged conflict between what Paul was in person and what he was in his letters reflected an unspiritual person, someone who was duplicitous, scheming, and cowardly. Paul says that though they walk in the flesh in the sense they live in the world as frail clay vessels that are subject to bodily weakness and death, they do not wage war according to the flesh, meaning they do not resort to cunning and deception, to shameful and underhanded tactics to gain the desired victory.

Paul does not specify the weapons he has in mind, but he says they have power to demolish "strongholds," which he identifies as "reasonings (arguments, plans, or thoughts) and every high thing rising up against the knowledge of God." In other words, his spiritual weapons have the power to tear down every mental defense that humans erect against the knowledge of God, including whatever rationalizations they may throw up to justify defiance of the moral and theological correction given by him as God's apostle. They are means of cognitive influence.

Follow Christ's example in suffering

The fact Peter in 1 Pet. 2:21-23 calls slaves who suffer unjust treatment by their masters to follow Christ's example of not issuing insults or threats is not a prohibition against Christians using lethal force to stop an unlawful deadly assault. Masters were lawful authorities over slaves and were entitled to have that authority respected (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22; 1 Tim. 6:1; Tit. 2:9-10). In honoring the master's position to the extraordinary extent of refusing to return insults and threats for unjust treatment, the Christian slave testified to the pagan world about the ennobling power of Christ.³¹ Refusing to defend oneself or others against a murderous criminal assault

³⁰ Grudem (2018), 559.

³¹ Norman Hillyer states in *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 83:

would not be a noble honoring of a lawful authority, and rather than a positive witness, it would be viewed as cowardly, senseless, and unloving.³² Moreover, for those who think a motive of persecution is key to the right of self-defense, the mistreatment of these Christian slaves may be motivated by their faith in Christ in which case it would qualify as persecution.

Alleged Contrary Examples

Jesus

Jesus never used physical violence to resist an unlawful deadly assault, but that does not mean his disciples are prohibited from doing so. His case was unique. He is the God-man who was on a mission to offer his life as the true atoning sacrifice for sin, and in conjunction with that mission he was protected miraculously from having his life taken prematurely (Lk. 4:29-30; Jn. 8:59, 10:39). He refused to allow Peter (Mat. 26:51-52; Lk. 22:50-51; Jn. 18:10-11) or any of his disciples (Jn. 18:36) to resort to physical violence to protect him from arrest because it was his purpose to be arrested and crucified.³³ Indeed, he had all the power of divinity at his disposal to prevent his arrest if he had wished to do so (e.g., Mat. 26:53). None of that is contrary to the right of self-defense he implicitly authorized for the disciples, as explained above. Kopel observes, "Only the sacrifice of Christ could redeem the world. Jesus' decision not to resist with swords, words, prayer, or flight was *sui generis*, and it posed no moral rule on mankind at large."³⁴

Stephen

The stoning of Stephen took place during an appearance before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council (Acts 6:12-7:60). They were formally without legal authority to administer the death penalty at that time (Jn. 18:31), but even if Stephen generally accepted a right of self-defense against an unlawful deadly assault, he may have been unwilling to defend himself in that situation because of the leadership role of the Sanhedrin within Judaism. The fact the execution took place in the city of Stephen's residence (Jerusalem), rather than on a journey, makes it less likely he would have been armed, but even if he had been, he was overwhelmed by a mob that would have given him no opportunity for defense. Therefore, one cannot jump from Stephen's

Masters fall into two main types. Some are good and considerate in their dealings with servants, who therefore do not find it difficult to submit. For servants having to deal day after day with masters who are harsh and mean, and who mistreat those who serve them, however, it is another story. Yet in both situations Peter tells his readers that it is their Christian duty to submit cheerfully. Their constancy in bearing whatever they have to suffer in the course of duty is a powerful sign to those over them that they possess inner resources beyond the natural. This positive attitude may indeed cause annoyance to an uncomprehending pagan master who expects a very different response. That in itself witnesses to the special grace believers are given and could be the means of prompting a desire in the master to share the believers' secret.

³² Both Greeks and Romans recognized a right of self-defense under both natural and positive law. In fact, "the digests of Paulus, one of the most influential Roman jurists of the 2nd or 3rd century C.E. indicate that 'all statutes and all rules of law allow people to repel force by force.'" Hessbruegge, 30-31.

³³ His nonresistance to his execution could perhaps also be explained as submission to the God-given authority of the state.

³⁴ Kopel, 159.

martyrdom to the conclusion he rejected a right of self-defense against an unlawful deadly assault, especially one unrelated to persecution. Accepting his fate, Stephen expressed in prayer his love for those who hated him and were wrongfully killing him.

James the brother of John

King Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, had James the brother of John arrested and executed by the sword (Acts 12:1-2). No details about the arrest are given, but even if James had been armed at the time and had an opportunity for defense, his failure to do so would not mean he rejected a right of self-defense against an unlawful deadly assault. Those arresting him were taking him into custody not seeking to kill him, and they were doing so under the lawful authority of the king. This was during the brief restoration of the Judean kingdom under Agrippa I, from AD 41 to 44, which included the right to administer capital punishment.³⁵

Church History

According to J. Daryl Charles, "It needs emphasizing that the Church *in its mainstream* has never taught . . . that all killing is morally wrong; such teaching is alien to both the Old and New Testaments."³⁶ From the late-second century until the time of Constantine, eight different Christian writers and one church order (*Apostolic Tradition*) indicate that killing is wrong, but it is not always clear if they are including within that proscription killing to stop an unlawful deadly assault. For example, Athenagoras, the earliest such writer (died about 180), defends Christians against charges of murder and cannibalism by arguing that they will not even watch people be put to death by animals or gladiators in the "games" and thus certainly would not themselves kill someone. But one could feel defiled by choosing to watch humans be killed and still think killing was justified when one was subjected to a murderous attack.

Minucius Felix's (late second to early third century) reference to the Christian aversion to "human slaughter" and their "shrinking from human blood" need not include killing to protect life. Cyprian's reference (died 258) to "the hand sullied by the blood-stained sword" parallels the crime of manslaughter, which may not include killing in self-defense, and his description of Christians as those "who may not kill but who must be killed" is in the context of official persecution not unlawful criminal attacks. Ambiguity on this issue is likewise present in the statements of Archelaus (late third century) and Arnobius of Sicca (early fourth century).³⁷

In his letter to Macedonius, the imperial vicar of Africa, the mature Augustine (AD 414) noted that it made a great difference in assessing the morality of killing a human being whether it had been done in self-defense or for the rescue of another. He stated (emphasis supplied):

³⁵ Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 59; Bruce McNab, *Believing Is Seeing: A Guide for Responding to John's Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2016), 233 (fn. 1).

³⁶ J. Daryl Charles, "The Early Church on War and Killing" (*Books & Culture*, January-February 2016): A Response," Providence (Jan.29, 2016), accessed on 11/18/18 at <https://providencemag.com/2016/01/early-church-on-war-killing-books-culture-response/>.

³⁷ See Ronald J. Sider, ed., *The Early Church on Killing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 168-171 and the sections from the first half of the book that are cited in those pages.

Yet it makes a great difference when one man is killed by another, whether it happened through a desire of injuring him, or of carrying off something dishonestly, as it might be done by an enemy, a thief; or whether it happened in the course of inflicting punishment or carrying out an order, as by a judge, an executioner; *or through self-defense or the rescue of another*, as a thief is killed by a traveler or an enemy by a soldier.³⁸

This sense of extenuation was formalized as moral justification by the great thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (AD 1224-1275). Hessbruegge writes:

Aquinas reasoned that any "[lethal] act of self-defense may have two effects, one is the saving of one's life, the other is the slaying of the aggressor." Since the defender's intention is not to slay, but to save his own life and every being naturally seeks to survive, self-defense is lawful. However, the defender "must not exceed the limits of blameless violence," but use "only necessary violence" and repel force "with moderation."³⁹

This is the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church,⁴⁰ and it accords with the teaching of most Protestant churches.⁴¹ Modern Christian ethicists who acknowledge the morality of using lethal force to stop an unlawful deadly assault include David Clyde Jones, John Frame, David Clark and Robert Rakestraw, Norman Geisler, Karl Peschke, Robertson McQuilken and Paul Copan, Scott B. Rae, and Wayne Grudem.⁴²

Conclusion

For the reasons given above, I am convinced it is morally permissible for a Christian to use lethal force to stop a life-threatening criminal assault. This right is recognized in the Old Testament and affirmed in the New Testament. The claim that other teaching and certain examples in the New Testament eliminate the right does not stand up to scrutiny.

³⁸ *Saint Augustine Letters*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1953), 294.

³⁹ Hessbruegge, 33.

⁴⁰ Hessbruegge, 34.

⁴¹ For example, the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 136) declares in pertinent part (emphasis supplied), "The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, *or necessary defence*."

⁴² David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 134-135; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 692-693; David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, *Readings in Christian Ethics Volume 2: Issues and Applications* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 498-499; Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 230; Karl H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics, Volume 2: Moral Theology in Light of Vatican II*, 3rd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012) 351-355; Robertson McQuilken and Paul Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Way of Wisdom*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 350; Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 409-412; Grudem (2018), 551-565.

A separate question is whether one who has the capability is morally *obligated* to use lethal force when necessary to protect an innocent third party from a deadly criminal assault. I am inclined to agree with Norman Geisler on the matter:

It is evil not to resist evil; it is morally wrong not to defend the innocent. Sometimes only physical force and taking lives are sufficient to accomplish this. All too often in our violent world, hostages are taken and all efforts at negotiation fail. Sometimes military action is the only way to save these innocent lives.

To permit a murder when one could have prevented it is morally wrong. To allow a rape when one could have hindered it is an evil. To watch an act of cruelty toward children without trying to intervene is morally inexcusable. In brief, not resisting evil is a sin of omission, and sins of omission can be just as evil as sins of commission. In biblical language, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (James 4:17). Any man who does not protect his wife and children against a violent intruder fails them morally. Likewise, any country that can defend its citizens against evil aggressors and does not do it is morally remiss.⁴³

I also believe love for others may in certain cases obligate one to use lethal force to protect one's own life, but many devout people throughout history have concluded it is immoral for an individual to use lethal force against a human being for any reason, including in defense of others or himself. By my understanding, those who refuse to use available lethal force when necessary to save innocent life are doing wrong, but they believe it would be wrong to do the contrary, to use such force. We both must live out our understanding of faithful service, trusting the mercy of our Lord to cleanse whatever sin our misunderstanding leads us to commit.

⁴³ Geisler, 236.