

A biblical response to John Piper's denial of the Right to bear Arms

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John Piper has posted a [response](#) to Jerry Falwell, Jr.'s call for Christians to arm themselves and his provision for students to carry arms on the Liberty University campus. Piper's position as outlined is about as close as one can come to individual pacifism without saying so. His response unfortunately ignores much of the context of the New Testament passages it cites, and ignores the Old Testament entirely. As such, I not only view it as unbiblical and disagree with it strongly, I think it would be dangerous and unloving for Christians to accept in society.

At the outset, Piper gives a qualification to illustrate he does not intend to give a comprehensive argument against self-defense in general, but he quickly undermines that qualification, and with each successive point, his position grows progressively absolute. He writes, "My main concern in this article is with the appeal to students that stirs them up to have the mindset: *Let's all get guns and teach them a lesson if they come here.*" He wants to narrow the argument: "The issue is not primarily about when and if a Christian may ever use force in self-defense, or the defense of one's family or friends. There are significant situational ambiguities in the answer to that question."

While he never addresses these "significant situational ambiguities," he keeps mentioning them while at the same time making broad, general statements like this: "The concern is the forging of a disposition in Christians to use lethal force, not as policemen or soldiers, but as ordinary Christians in relation to harmful adversaries." That's a very broad position which entails that unless they are agents of the civil government, Christians ought *not* to use lethal force at all. Thus, while he says he wants to leave that issue to the side because of its ambiguities, he immediately posits a policy which answers it in the negative definitively.

Dr. Piper continues in this vein through the entire piece. And I think he feels his own inconsistency here, for he immediately sets up the contrary position as a straw man: "Does it accord with the New Testament to encourage the attitude that says, 'I have the power to kill you in my pocket, so don't mess with me'? My answer is, No."

Simply put, nobody argues for this. This is not the position of Christian leaders who are trained and informed on the biblical view of defense. Not even Falwell, Jr.'s borderline-intemperate remarks are well represented by such an extreme position. To represent the pro-self-defense position this way is irresponsible on Dr. Piper's part.

Piper then follows with nine considerations which he believes backs up his position, and one of these is broken into seven parts. I will not take the time to address them all at length, but only those couple that I believe are most central to his position. (Some of my more comprehensive biblical arguments can be found [here](#) and [elsewhere](#).)

Piper's primary argument is that [Romans 12:17–13:4](#) prohibits private Christian individuals from engaging in vengeance. The power of the sword, the text says, it clearly left only to the civil government. And even though in a Republic like ours the people *are* the government, Paul did not envision "that Christians citizens should all carry swords so the enemy doesn't get any bright ideas."

While it is true that Paul (and Jesus, [Matthew 5:38–39](#)) instructs against personal vengeance, and that the power of the sword belongs to civil government, this does not mean that God's people are *absolutely* forbidden in any and all circumstances from self-defense of their lives or property, or especially the defense of the lives of loved ones and neighbors.

It is here that Piper's problem resides most clearly in his understanding and use of Scripture. By abstracting passages like these not only from their historical context, but virtually *any* context, he absolutizes them to teach that

citizens must always be passive before thieves, robbers, rapists, and murderers, and by extension terrorists, invaders, and tyrannical governments.

But is this how we handle Scripture?

No. First, Piper does not deal *anywhere* with *clear* Old Testament passages that instruct in both principle and practice that God's people have the right even of lethal self-defense. Readers ought to be familiar with [Exodus 22:2](#): "If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account."

The principle is that when an attacker attacks in a lethal situation, that attacker may legitimately be met with up to lethal force. The "no vengeance" principle is here overridden by exigency. It was for this reason that Jesus told Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane to put away his drawn sword. It was not, as Piper alleges, because we are pilgrims who have no right to use swords. It was because Jesus was intimately familiar with the Old Testament principle: the moment you reveal yourself in public as a lethal offense, you make yourself a target for a lethal force defense. This is exactly why Jesus said what He did: "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" ([Matt. 26:52](#)).

Likewise, when King Ahasuerus granted the captive Jews the right to defend themselves against attackers it included the right "to assemble and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill and to annihilate the entire army of any people or province which might attack them, including children and women, and to plunder their spoil" ([Esther 8:11](#)).

The Jews knew that the Scriptures allowed them the right of self-defense already, but they knew spoiling the attacker was across the line. So when the time came, they openly defended themselves: "the Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying" ([Esther 9:5](#)); but note: "they did not lay their hands on the plunder" ([Esther 9:10](#)).

This law and example are clear, and they are not rescinded by New Testament teachings. Indeed, while Christian pietists like Piper may be tempted to say the "No vengeance" principle is a New Testament principle which does away with the Old, the truth is just the opposite. To establish that principle in [Romans 12:19–20](#), Paul quotes two *Old* Testament passages: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" is quoted directly from [Deuteronomy 32:35](#) (the Old Testament law!). The following statement about loving your enemy is taken directly from [Proverbs 25:21–22](#), which is itself based again upon Old Testament law ([Exodus 23:4–5](#)).

So it will not suffice to argue that the "No vengeance" principle is a New Testament improvement upon the Old. That principle is *itself* an Old Testament principle.

But this means we must realize it is perfectly reconcilable with the rest of the Old Testament law which, despite including the principle against personal vengeance, also make allowances for self-defense and lethal force when appropriate. The two principles are not at odds; they are perfectly in accord as they apply in different situations and contexts.

Thus, it is here where Piper's view of Scripture seems to be molded and shaped by pietism and an unacceptable neglect of the Old Testament which together would leave Christian families defenseless before violent attackers. This reflects the kind of New Testament-only heresy which creates the pietist-humanist alliance—a capitulation and neglect on the part of Christian leaders which leaves social issues to the whims of Bible-hating liberals who are all too eager to accept the gift. I won't stand for it. *Read the Old Testament basis for your New Testament principles, and then accept that that basis demands the balance of the Old Testament as well* except where *explicitly* replaced.

But Piper is shockingly consistent with his New Testament-only position of defenselessness, and it is here that his argument get most troubling. He argues that one retort to his position will boil down to, "Can I shoot my wife's assailant." What should be a no-brainer biblically speaking, Piper calls an "instinct" and offers seven points on his way to answering "No."

I was shocked and appalled that Piper is so anti-gun and anti-defense that he expects Christians to stand by

watching their wife or children being assaulted, raped, or murdered before their very eyes without reacting in defense. He doesn't like to accept that his answer is "No," and even says there is no direct answer, but then again immediately makes it clear: "there is no direct dealing with the situation of using lethal force to save family and friend, except in regards to police and military."

This is ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. Why would the God of the Old Testament give clear guidelines for self-defense in such cases, but suddenly in the New Testament retract them and give that right only to a handful of government agents who can't get to the scene any more quickly than an average of 10 minutes? What love is this?

People let's be clear. Police, for what good they do, do not protect you from criminals, rapists, and murderers. Police more often than not show up late and write reports about what happened before they got there. Your wife's best hope at this moment is a gun in her husband's hand. That would be the most Christ-honoring item that could be on the scene.

I am shocked and saddened as I read Piper's defense of this position. When viewing his wife being raped, he would contemplate within himself: "Our primary aim in life is to show that Christ is more precious than life. So when presented with this threat to my wife or daughter or friend, my heart should incline toward doing good in a way that would accomplish this great aim. There are hundreds of variables in every crisis that might affect how that happens."

NO. There is only *one* variable in this situation: the angle at which you shoot the rapist in the head.

There is *one* principle at play here, and it is another Old Testament principle repeated *nine times* in the New Testament: *love your neighbor as yourself*. How is it showing Christ's love if we allow someone to be raped or murdered before us and do nothing? There are no variables here. The love of neighbor compels every person to protect innocent life and to level criminals who have made themselves a lethal threat.

If Paul said that a person who merely doesn't provide for their family is worse than an infidel and has *denied the faith* (1 Tim. 5:8), what in the world do you think He would say of a guy who sat contemplating pious platitudes while his family was beaten and slaughtered before him?

Piper continues applying his principle: "I live in the inner city of Minneapolis, and I would personally counsel a Christian not to have a firearm available for such circumstances."

I would counsel Christians to listen to someone who has not made the love of Christ a meaningless abstraction. Arm yourself Christian. Love your neighbor as yourself.

In closing, Piper hits upon a theme he mentions several times. He argues that we are pilgrims in this world, and that Jesus told us to expect "violent hostility." We should just remember that we are lambs among wolves, and that our lot is not to shoot the wolves but resign ourselves to be devoured.

Let's just say that this was part of the truth when the disciples were facing a persecuting government where armed resistance would have been not only futile but would have been met with government force as sedition. But as I have made clear [here](#) and [here](#) and [elsewhere](#), the "pilgrim" motif of the New Testament was a temporary phenomenon for *that generation* until the persecuting authorities of the unbelieving Jewish culture were destroyed. The writer of Hebrews makes it clear that the disciples had arrived at the Zion that Abraham sought, and it was not something they should wait to expect until after they died.

Even if it were the case that we are still in a "pilgrim" situation, it would still not invalidate the abiding aspects of the *love* commanded the Old Testament consistent with self-defense. Christians have the right to self-defense, home-defense, and the defense of relatives and neighbors.

To say otherwise is to neglect too much of the Bible, and indeed that's what Piper's article actually does: it neglects the context of what it quotes and neglects the Old Testament entirely. For that reason, and for demanding Christians

stand idly by while criminals attack and murder people, even family, and indeed even to check introspectively one's heart even before calling the police for help (!)—Piper's position is dangerous to society.

Further, it is indicative of those who categorically reject the Old Testament as informative of the New. It is symptomatic of pietistic (closet) Christianity, and those "two-kingdoms" types who say the Bible has nothing to say to the public square. It's time to abandon all of those positions and adopt a robust biblical worldview that puts the love of God and love of neighbor into practical action in the ways Scripture commands and illustrates—and that includes the right to bear arms and the right to self-defense.

Like I said, we have not dealt all we could with Piper's comments, but these hit the core of why his position is unbiblical. It is divorced from the context of Scripture and denies what the Bible teaches regarding something as central and foundational as loving your neighbor. His views are pietistic. Where the Bible speaks to such areas of life, he ignores it, and subverts the principles by transforming them into issues only of abstract love of the individual contemplating his own heart in the prayer closet. I say we let the Bible speak to all of life like it does, and then apply it wherever it speaks. And be well armed and trained in arms while doing so. (And find a seminary or college that will allow you to do so.)