

To carry or not to carry – that is the question!

On 5th July 1990, the leaders of the worldwide SDA Church issued an official statement entitled “Ban of Sales of Assault Weapons to Civilians” deploring gun violence and calling for restrictions on the ability to purchase “assault weapons.” This official SDA statement forces us to ask a deeper question of whether or not it is legitimate to bear arms in defense of one’s self, family or religious liberty?

First, consider the evidence from nature. Self-defense is an intrinsic right given us by God. God isn’t against arms for self-defense. How do we know this? Consider the porcupine, the skunk, the elk or the moose. Nature teaches us that the means for self-defense are God-given because we live in a sinful world.

Second, the evidence from Scripture. God Himself utilizes weapons of war. The angel sent to guard Eden was armed with a sword (Gen. 3.24), an angel armed with a sword appeared to Balaam (Num. 22.23), and Jesus appeared Himself before Joshua, armed with a sword (Josh. 5.13). The Mosaic law enshrines the right to lethal violence in self-defense (Ex. 22.2). The psalmist wrote, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46.1), which did not conflict with praising God, “Who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle” (Ps. 144.1). David was indeed prepared for his battle with Goliath. He was skilled in the use of a sling – the rapid-fire and lethal assault weapon of his day. Solomon wrote, “the horse is prepared against the day of battle; but safety is of the LORD” (Prov. 21.31). We are to train for war and prepare the horse for battle, and we then trust the outcome to God. Furthermore, “like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked” (Prov. 25.26).

Abraham, the father of the faithful, maintained a household with 318 men trained in the use of the modern weapons of his era (Gen. 14). He led this trained and equipped army of household servants to rescue the Lot, his family, and many innocents from foreign enslavement. On his return, Melchizedek (a forerunner of Christ), personally blessed Abraham and affirmed that God had given him the victory (Gen. 14.20). Commenting on this story, EGW wrote that, “seeking, first of all, divine counsel, Abraham prepared for war. From his own encampment he summoned three hundred and eighteen trained servants, men trained in the fear of God, in the service of their master, and in the practice of arms.It was seen that righteousness is not cowardice, and that Abraham's religion made him courageous in maintaining the right and defending the oppressed. His heroic act gave him a widespread influence among the surrounding tribes. {PP 134.1-135.1}

In 1 Samuel 11.1-4, King Nahash of Amman attacked Jabesh-Gilead, threatening to gouge out the right eye of every inhabitant as a disgrace to all Israel. What should Saul have done? Turn the other cheek? Based on a popular interpretation of Matt. 5.38-39, he should have sent a message to the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead saying, “Do not resist the evil, but offer to the enemy your left eyes also. We will stay here and weep for you.” What actually happened? Scripture records that “the Spirit of God came upon Saul in power” (v. 6), inspiring Saul to respond militarily, saving the people of Jabesh-Gilead. Clearly, the Spirit of God inspired this military deliverance.

When under threat of attack while rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah recorded that ““we prayed to our God, and posted a guard” He encouraged the people thus, “don’t be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes” (4.9, 14). Those who worked carried materials in one hand and their swords in their other hand (Neh. 4.14-18). God blessed their work and the walls went up!

In Esther’s time, the Jews were about to come under attack as a result of Haman’s ethnic and religious hatred. They prayed, fasted, and then banded themselves together in citizen bands, each with their own weapons, and destroyed any who came against them. Once again, God clearly blessed this act of righteous self-defense against those inspired by ethnic bigotry and religious hatred of Yahweh’s followers on earth.

Moving to the New Testament, what do we make of Jesus' teaching about "turning the other cheek?" (Matt. 5.38-39). A slap to the cheek is humiliating, but it is not life-threatening. If insulted, ridiculed or demeaned, we should not retaliate. We are to bear patiently the humiliation. But if we are to be consistent with the above biblical characters, all of whom were inspired by the Spirit of God to military action in defense of God's people, we must conclude that self-defense from deadly force isn't being addressed in this teaching of Jesus. We are not to offer our jugular if under an attack that seeks not merely our reputation but our very life!

What about Matt. 26.52? "For all that take the sword shall perish by the sword." Peter was not told to throw the sword away, but to put it back into its place. He was not to fight the detachment of soldiers coming to arrest Jesus (John 18.3). Likewise, we are not to draw the sword against duly authorized officials of the law, who are duty-bound to bear the sword. If Jesus meant everyone in this statement, He was also condemning every law officer. God calls those authorities who bear the sword to execute wrath on evildoers the "ministers of God" (Rom. 13.4). The Bible thus teaches that there is a legitimate use of the sword and also an illegitimate use of the sword (Rev.13.10), and those that kill illegitimately will face eternal judgment.

Third, the evidence from the Spirit of Prophecy. EGW's own family owned rifles and used them to feed themselves.¹ EGW often travelled with bodyguards armed with repeating rifles for personal protection.² EGW counselled her husband to take time off to fish, camp and hunt.³ She recorded a man using firearms to gain back stolen animals⁴, and commented positively on a white man who used a (semi-automatic) revolver to halt the lynching of a "leading black believer."⁵ And God's role for men in the family? "The Lord has constituted the husband the head of the wife to be her protector..." (EGW, Adventist Home, p. 125). "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5.8). Husbands are to provide food and protection for their wives. Those who refuse to protect or provide for their family are worse than an unbeliever.

Fourth, the evidence from history. Raised in the UK and a student of European history, I am acutely aware of the absolute necessity it has been for Protestants over the centuries to bear arms in the face of aggressive papal onslaught. The lesson of the Spanish Armada, the Waldenses, the Hussites, the Bohemians, the Huguenots, the Cathars, the Battle of the Boyne, the German electors, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the English civil war and the Thirty Year War is that Protestant armies comprised of armed citizens were essential to resisting papal aggression. Without Protestant citizen armies, armed and willing to take the field of battle, the Protestant Reformation may never have survived. In our modern era, the Christians of northern Iraq and Nigeria, under savage assault by Boko Haram and ISIS, would suffer even greater loss without armed men willing to defend them. Sometimes those defenders are government forces, but often they are local Christian militias, stepping in to defend the innocent against murderous assault when it is politically convenient for governments to look the other way.

And so we return to the official SDA statement. Despite the "shock and awe" of the statement title, the only specific recommendation is as follows: "The sale of automatic or semi-automatic assault weapons should be strictly controlled. This would reduce the use of weapons by mentally disturbed people and criminals, especially those involved in drug and gang activities." Thus the statement only specifically recommends that the "mentally disturbed" and "criminals" should not gain access to certain weapons, and has nothing to say about law-abiding citizens. As many SDA institutions around the world, including at least one Division office, are protected by private guards armed with either shotguns or semi-automatic weapons, clearly the official SDA statement does not restrict law abiding church leaders or regular members from availing themselves of semi-automatic weapons for defense purposes. Furthermore, no SDA is obliged to uphold or agree with any such official statement, as

¹ EGW, MS 12, 1873, P. 3.

² EGW, Lt20a-1879 (May 3, 1879) par. 7.

³ EGW, 9MR 317. 2.

⁴ EGW, 3MR 157. 2.

⁵ EGW 5BIO 62.4.

the baptismal vows only include a covenant to uphold the fundamental Bible teachings of the SDA Church (i.e. the 28 FBs) and not any of the plethora of statements that small groups of denominational leaders may issue from time to time.

In conclusion, the right to self-defense is clearly biblical. In the modern era, an effective self-defense must include the option of semi-automatic weapons, for those are overwhelmingly the weapons of choice of the oppressor all around the globe. Christians are not to use violence for propagating the Gospel, for personal revenge or out of hatred, but they do have the right to use arms in defense of themselves, their family, and the community of faith, when under attack. In this context, theologian Norman Geisler argues convincingly that “to permit 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 to children without trying to intervene is morally inexcusable. In brief, not resisting evil is an evil of omission, and an evil of omission can be just as evil as an evil of commission. A man who refuses to protect his wife and children against a violent intruder fails them morally.”⁶

Living in an evil world, difficult choices are forced upon us. I hope and pray that I never have to defend my family, myself or a neighbor from a violent assault, but if that evil day comes, as a husband and father it is my responsibility to take all necessary measures to protect the innocents whom God has entrusted to my care.

⁶ Geisler, N, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, p. 236