

## Are Christians Justified in Self-Defense?



I am an Old Catholic priest who has been teaching martial arts for over 35 years. Despite the fact that neither my seminary, my bishop, nor my fellow church members have ever voiced concerns about a conflict between my clerical and martial pursuits, I struggled with the issue of Christian self-defense all the way through seminary right up until putting the final period on this article. I wrote this primarily for me. But I hope that it will also assist other Christians looking for a resolution to the question of Christian self-defense and serve as an adequate defense against those who think it is inappropriate for a priest to practice and teach self-defense classes.

To be absolutely clear, I am not a Roman Catholic, but an Old Catholic. We are independent Catholics who closely resemble Anglicans, and who hold a wide range of opinions on most matters. There is, therefore, no single, official, Old Catholic doctrine to which I can turn. I've had to make sense of this by the light my

conscience and the guidance of my bishop.

This struggle has not been easy. I've been at the crossroads of giving up martial arts many times throughout this journey. For me, Jesus isn't just a role model. I aspire to what St. Paul describes in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." I don't want to act like Christ, I want to be like Christ in my heart and soul. So, I take this very, very seriously indeed.

I'm going to try and explain my position so that any Christian, regardless of persuasion, can understand and benefit. So, to support my argument, I'm going to include references to both the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church and to Holy Scripture. The Orthodox churches have no fixed, universal catechism or I would've included that too.

### *But First, the Anabaptists*

The Christians who make the most compelling argument for total non-resistance are the Anabaptists. Their argument hinges primarily on the Sermon on the Mount and on those writings of the church fathers which seem to advocate complete non-resistance. [This website](#) presents a very detailed exposition of the Anabaptist position with many quotes and references.

My opposition to the Anabaptist position is five-fold. First, I believe that their interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is a form of *reductio ad absurdum*. They are taking Jesus's statements about slapping faces and tit-for-tat court battles, pushing them to the extreme, and making them extend to all forms of violence.

Second, Anabaptist arguments look at the issue through a modern lens, applying a First World definition of “violence” and “self-defense” to ancient cultures. In places where this article can reach, the types of extreme violence and atrocity that were commonplace in the ancient world are now inconceivable. As an example, human sacrifice was common in both East and West well into the Middle Ages. In the Americas it was more prevalent and endured even longer, right up to Western colonization in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Overton Window has shifted to such a degree that when Christian pacifists read the works of the church fathers, they are confused as to what is and is not “violence.”

My third objection is an extension of my first and second objections. As inconceivable as it is to the modern mind, non-violence would have been absolutely insane to everyone two millennia ago. If Jesus or the church fathers had intended all Christians to be non-violent under all circumstances, they would’ve felt compelled to come out and say so. If you are making an argument you know will sound preposterous to your listeners – totally at odds with everything understood by everyone everywhere – you don’t tap dance around the issue or drop hints. There aren’t any quotes that explicitly say we should stand by while our families are butchered.

Fourth, many of the church fathers’ statements regarding non-violence apply to the effectiveness of non-violence when spreading the Gospel. Obviously, as Tertullian said, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Self-sacrifice in the course of evangelization is an effective tool used by saints. That’s what makes them saints.

And finally I will close with my fifth argument against the Anabaptist position by quoting theologians Norman Geisler and J. P. Moreland who said,

*“To permit murder when one could have prevented it is morally wrong. To allow a rape when one could have hindered it is 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. Any man who refuses to protect his wife and children against a violent intruder fails them morally.”* (The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, Praeger 1990)

### *Roman Catholic Church Teaching*

The dogma of the Catholic church makes it clear the everyone has the right to defend himself against an unjust aggressor. According to the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#):

*(2263) The legitimate defense of persons and societies is not an exception to the prohibition against the murder of the innocent that constitutes intentional killing. "The act of self-defense can have a double effect: the preservation of one's own life; and the killing of the aggressor...The one is intended, the other is not.*

*(2264) Love toward oneself remains a fundamental principle of morality. Therefore it is legitimate to insist on respect for one's own right to life. Someone who defends his life is not guilty of murder even if he is forced to deal his aggressor a lethal blow: If a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful: whereas if he repels force with moderation, his defense will be lawful. . . . Nor is it necessary for salvation that a man omit the act of moderate self-defense to avoid killing the other man, since one is bound to take more care of one's own life than of another's.*

*(2265) Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others. The defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm. For this reason, those who legitimately hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility.*

One may employ whatever force is necessary, and even take the life of an unjust assailant. However, no more injury may be inflicted on the assailant than is necessary to thwart his evil designs, and one must be mindful of certain details:

- An actual attack must occur. Threats and planned attacks don't warrant violence.
- In order to defend property with violence, the property must be of significant, life-threatening value – your home, your farm or livelihood, your life savings – such that losing it would threaten survival. We can't violently defend a crust of bread. Remember that it is permissible, in extreme necessity, to steal food (Matthew 12:3-4). David and his men unlawfully ate the consecrated bread. Act accordingly, having mercy upon those stealing for survival.
- Again, in all cases, only force necessary may be used.

### *Biblical Support for Self-Defense*

What about strictly biblical support for self-defense? Certainly there is no pacifism in the pages of the Old Testament. It is replete with examples of righteous self-defense. Detailing them all would be tedious, boring, and lengthen this article to two hundred pages. But we'd be remiss if we didn't at least tackle the commandment, "Thou Shalt Not Kill." Yes, it's usually translated *kill*, but the original Hebrew word refers to taking the life of an innocent – unjust killing. Therefore it should actually be, "Thou Shalt Not Murder." This is reflected in the New International Translation. Hopefully everyone knows this by now. But if not, read the [Wikipedia article on the First Commandment](#) for a good overview.

What about the New Testament? The first and most important passage with which we must contend is Jesus' command to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39). This is often cited as a pacifist statement that forbids self-defense. But this has to do with getting slapped on the cheek, not the correct response to being attacked by a knife-

wielding maniac, or the invasion of one's country by a conquering army. Read in context, Jesus' statements are made in opposition to petty, tit-for-tat, back-and-forth retaliations, even legal ones. What we are being told seems to apply to slaps in the face – personal slights and inconveniences, unpaid debts, and other minor offenses.

Serious threats to life and limb are another matter entirely, and I was unable to find a single passage in the Bible that forbids self-defense. But Jesus is our model for behavior, and he never fights anybody, neither with fists nor with weapons, right? Well, perhaps he does. In John 2:13-16, we read,

*13 The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 He found in the temple those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, and the changers of money sitting. 15 He made a whip of cords and drove all out of the temple, both the sheep and the oxen; and he poured out the changers' money and overthrew their tables. 16 To those who sold the doves, he said, "Take these things out of here! Don't make my Father's house a marketplace!" (John 2:13-16, World English Bible)*

In this scene, Jesus makes a determination that certain vendors are defiling the temple – essentially breaking the law. This is, apparently, a new and shocking interpretation.

*"The chief priests and the scribes heard it, and sought how they might destroy him. For they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching." (Mark 11:18, World English Bible)*

There have been, and continue to be, very intense and highly technical arguments about how this passage should be translated from the Greek. Some say he was only whipping the animals, not the people. Others say that he whips both people and animals. On this point, linguistic arguments don't hold much sway with me because, as a martial artist and a grown adult with common sense, I have a reasonably good working knowledge of human behavior.

Please imagine going down to the local flea market this coming weekend, turning over the vendor's tables, and ordering them all to leave immediately. What would happen? Would all the vendors immediately depart? No. At least one, if not half-a-dozen, pugnacious, burly, and/or extremely irate ladies and gents, all intent on making a buck, would toss you out on your ear. And if you pulled that stunt in my home state of Virginia, you might also get a pistol jabbed into your face somewhere along the way. Now ask yourself: Are people more or less tame today than they were in the ancient world? If you answer that people in Jesus' time were far tougher and more ornery than modern folks, then I agree. It only makes sense that Jesus improvised some kind of non-lethal whip of rope or cords and used it to run those vendors out.

If he hadn't used a weapon, he wouldn't have been successful. If he hadn't used some kind of weapon, the Gospel would instead recount that he tried and failed to run them out – that they beat him with sticks and sent him packing. Perhaps from one of the vendor's tables he snatched up a coil of rope or a bundle of the cords used to tie up robes. Whatever he used, at the very least he menaced them, but it seems probable that

he smacked a few. Clearly he injured no one seriously. Charges would've been leveled against him if he had hurt anyone, and no such charges are mentioned in the Gospel.

Jesus was both a rabbi and God incarnate. He ordered the lawbreakers out of his temple and his house. They wouldn't go, so he used appropriate, non-lethal force to ensure they did. Violence against lawbreakers and evildoers was permitted in biblical times just as it is permitted now:

- The Roman centurion Cornelius is portrayed as a righteous and God-fearing man worthy of baptism (Acts 10).
- The centurion whose servant Jesus heals is possessed of great faith, and Jesus never tells him to give up his position (Matthew 8:5-13).
- When the soldiers come to the Jordan River and ask St. John the Baptist what actions they should repent, St. John merely tells them not to extort people – he doesn't tell them to resign their posts, to atone for those they've killed in war, or to become pacifists (Luke 3:14).
- In none of the Gospel accounts does Jesus utter any outcry of injustice over the execution of the two guilty criminals on his left and right sides.

These are powerful passages. But I've come to believe that the single Bible passage that is the key to unlocking a sound Christian perspective on self-defense is Luke 22:36-38. Here Jesus says to the apostles "if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one." The apostles take him literally and respond, "See here, we've got two swords." Jesus responds cryptically, "It is enough." Three primary questions follow from this passage:

1. If Jesus was being literal and advocating the need for weapons, why would he command all twelve of them to get swords – but then say that two swords are enough for them all?
2. If Jesus wanted the disciples to buy and use real swords, why did he cry out, "Stop! No more of this!" and heal the soldier when Peter hacked off the soldier's ear?
3. But if Jesus didn't intend for his apostles to defend themselves, why did he allow two of them to carry swords at all? Why didn't he tell them to get rid of even those two swords?

Let's remember that, in Roman times, religion and government were one. There was no separation. This means that the things Jesus and his disciples were saying threatened the Roman Empire, and they were doing it on purpose. Just saying "Jesus is Lord" was a rebellious statement since the Roman Emperor was called *Lord*. But Jesus was declaring that he was the ruler of a greater kingdom than the Roman one – a kingdom accessible to everyone and yet beyond the reach of Roman gods and rulers – a place where the poor, the downtrodden, and sinners could hope for eternal life. His words ran counter to thousands of years of social structure, both Roman and Hebrew.

*"My Kingdom is not of this world. If my Kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight, that I wouldn't be delivered to the Jews. But now my Kingdom is not from here."* (John 18:36)

A group of troublemakers armed to the teeth and threatening to destabilize the empire was bound to be put down by force. And rightfully so. If a nation-state allows its laws and customs to be threatened by armed militants, constant strife and civil war will always be the natural consequences. A militant group gets what it deserves.

An armed group fighting to turn the social order upside down is inciting violence. Jesus would never want his disciples to do that. This is why Jesus tells Peter to sheathe his sword, and why he heals the soldier's ear. This is also why Jesus doesn't tell Peter to throw his sword in the river, or to sell it and buy a basket of flowers. He just tells him to sheathe it. Because it's okay to use it appropriately for self-defense. It's not okay to use it to incite violence and start a bloody revolt.

A fight for hearts and minds, fueled by sacrifice, is Christ's way to turn the world right side up. It worked then, and it works now. The tiny, upstart religion of Christianity grew from 12 men into 2.7 billion men, women, and children – a third of the world's population. This is why I believe that the passage we are discussing from Luke 22 – “if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one” – refers to the Sword of Truth and Discernment, the same sword that Jesus is referring to in Matthew 10:34-39:

*Jesus said, 34 “Don't think that I came to send peace on the earth. I didn't come to send peace, but a sword. 35 For I came to set a man at odds against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 A man's foes will be those of his own household. 37 He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me isn't worthy of me. 38 He who doesn't take his cross and follow after me isn't worthy of me. 39 He who seeks his life will lose it; and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Jesus wants us to put the truth first, even when our families, tribes, and clans disagree. He wants us to struggle with sin, to wrestle with iniquity, to do battle with greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, sloth, and especially pride. He does not want us starting violent confrontations over spiritual matters. If that's what he was about, he would've become a king in the mold of Saul, David, and Solomon.

The questions and apparent contradictions in the biblical passages seem to arise from “apples and oranges” comparisons. Jesus allowed two of his apostles to carry swords because weapons were necessary and right to be used in self-defense of the group against violent attacks as they traveled along the dangerous roads, and through the crime-ridden cities, of his day. What he didn't want his disciples to do was go about “rattling their sabers” in the face of the Roman Empire or other Jewish factions, inciting bloody violence, war, insurrection, and death.

The only cogent answers all three of the questions posed at the outset are:

1. If Jesus was being literal and advocating the need for weapons, why would he command all twelve of them to get swords – but then say that two swords are enough for them all? *A: Because he was commanding them to arm themselves with the Sword of Discernment. Two actual swords were sufficient for self-defense.*

2. If Jesus wanted the disciples to buy and use real swords, why did he cry out, “Stop! No more of this!” and heal the soldier when Peter hacked off the soldier’s ear? *A: Jesus thought two swords were enough for self-defense of the group. He was commanding them to arm themselves with the Sword of Discernment in their evangelization efforts. He healed the soldier’s ear to stop a bloody insurrection.*
3. But if Jesus didn’t intend for his apostles to defend themselves, why did he allow two of them to carry swords at all? Why didn’t he tell them to get rid of even those two swords? *A: Jesus supported self-defense. That’s why he allowed two of them to carry swords, which he thought were sufficient for that purpose.*

My last note on scriptural interpretation relies on St. Augustine’s statement that,

*“Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”* (On Christian Doctrine, 1.36.40).

Any interpretation of scripture that puts an evildoer’s wellbeing before that of an innocent person’s only promotes anger, frustration, resentment, and cries of injustice toward God. The blood of the innocent cries out from the ground (Genesis 4:10).

### *In Conclusion*

What I see emerging from the biblical corpus, and from the teaching of the church from its earliest days, is that it’s wrong to start a fight. But it’s always permissible to use necessary force – but no more! – to thwart evildoers, deter lawbreakers, and to stop aggressors. I think it’s clear that the disciples, who were the first Christian priests, were allowed to defend themselves, using weapons if need be. I am a priest who’s married. It is my duty to defend my wife, children, grandchildren, and our family home. Failure to do so would be a sin of omission.

This is why I am comfortable being a priest, a martial arts instructor, a gun owner, and a supporter of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

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