Many anti-gun and anti-self-defense activists have long used the Bible to push their pacifist agenda. In truth, the assertion that the New Testament compels pacifism is an extraordinarily weak argument.

By Dave Kopel

UCLA law professor Eugene Volokh has coined the phrase “pacifist-aggressive” to describe people who try to use the force of law to impose their own pacifist beliefs on everyone else. At the heart of the gun control debate in the United States is the pacifist aggression of certain religious officials.

For example, when Congress was considering reforms of the federal Gun Control Act, to stop such Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms acts as telling a gun dealer that a certain action was legal, and then prosecuting him for following the Bureau’s own advice, the Presbyterian Church, USA, sent a representative to testify to the Senate against the reforms. The Presbyterian Church representative declared that his church “has resolved, in the context of gun control, that it is against the killing of any one, anywhere for any reason.”

The National Coalition to Ban Handguns (later renamed the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence) was, in effect, founded as a subsidiary of the Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church. Methodist publications tell women that they have a duty to submit to a rapist, rather than endanger the rapist by shooting him.

Likewise, Guillermo Chavez, of the Ministry of God’s Human Community of the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, wrote a letter to Jessica Sparks (an attorney who served as editor of the NRA magazine American Guardian) in which Chavez stated that a good Christian could not be a member of the National Rifle Association. It is an atrocious form of intolerance for some religious groups to attempt to use the force of government to impose their pacifist views on everyone else. Moreover, the assertion that the New Testament compels pacifism is an extraordinarily weak argument.

To begin with, according to the New Testament, Jesus personally used violence. When Jesus came to the great temple in Jerusalem, he “found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers’ money and overthrew the table.” (John 2:14-16) A scourge is a type of whip or lash, and is thus a weapon, although not a deadly weapon. If Christianity required pacifism, then a Christian could not be a soldier.

One of the themes of the New Testament is how the message of Jesus, at first delivered only to the Jews, came to be seen as meant for Gentiles, too. One of the early stories of this transformation is told in the Gospel According to St. Luke. Not long after Jesus began his ministry and called his apostles, a Roman military commander, a centurion, asked for Jesus to come and heal one of the centurion’s servants, saying that he “neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.” (Luke 7:2-10) Slightly rephrased, the centurion’s humble request for healing is repeated by Roman Catholic priests at every mass, during the consecration of the host (the bread and wine).

“...When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him [the centurion], and turned...”
him about, and said unto the people that followed him, 'I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.' (Luke 7:7) The Roman centurion is presented as a marvel requiring no such statement on the part of Jesus to stop soldiering, or that Jesus had to demonstrate the centurion's profession.

One day, some tax collectors ("publicans") came to Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, asked to be baptized, and said "Master, what shall we do?" Tax collectors were feared and despised by the public, since they tended to exact as much as possible from every taxpayer and then spend government and keep the surplus for themselves. John replied to the tax collectors, "Exact no more than that which is appointed to you." (Luke 3:12-13) The story suggests that tax collection is (unlike prostitution) not an inherently immoral profession. A person can be a righteous tax collector while also being "a devout soldier" who "waited for the right moment" (Acts 23:25-26). Read in isolation, this text says that a good Christian must hate his fellow man. But, of course, the vast majority of Christians know better than to read the text without a context. They know that the rest of the Bible repeatedly enjoins husbands and wives to love each other, and insists that children honor their parents. So the discerning reader applies some context to the "hate your family" passage.

One of the core arguments of Christian pacifism is quotation of various New Testament passages that tell Christians to be peaceful, loving and forgiving. "Turn the other cheek," is the most famous of these passages. But as the old saying of preachers puts it, "A text without a context is a pretext."

Consider this text: "If any man come to me [Jesus], and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it." (Luke 14:26) Read in isolation, this text says that a good Christian must hate his family. But, of course, the vast majority of Christians know better than to read the text without a context. They know that the rest of the Bible repeatedly enjoins husbands and wives to love each other, and insists that children honor their parents. So the discerning reader applies some context to the "hate your family" passage.

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man shall sue thee at the law, and take away thy cloak, let him have thy cloak also." (Matthew 5:38-39)

A slap on the cheek is a very serious insult, not a deadly attack. At the time of Jesus, Jewish law imposed a much larger fine for slapping someone than for simple hitting. (The Mishnah. Seder Nedarim, Tractate Avva Kamma (law of damages), vol. 1(a), ch. 8, sect. 6). Notice that Jesus referred to a slap on the "right cheek." Such a slap was particularly insulting, because the slap would be delivered with the slapper's left hand. The left hand was typically used for toilet functions; people ate with their right hands. So the sense of the passage involves a terrible insult, rather than a life-threatening violent attack.

Yet pacifists try to turn "turn the other cheek" into a legal code that reads, "If you or some other innocent person is violently attacked, do not harm the aggressor, even if the aggressor is about to kill the innocent." The notion that "turn the other cheek" can be extrapolated into an inflexible rule runs into a very serious problem. Jesus quite obviously did not consider his advice about slapped cheeks to be a mandatory legal code of Christian conduct. In the only story in the Bible in which Jesus was struck on the cheek, Jesus did not say, "If someone should slap you, turn the cheek to him, but instead rebuked the man. After being arrested and brought to the Sanhedrin, Jesus was slapped by a guard. Jesus responded, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?" (John 18:22-23)

C.S. Lewis 'book The Weight of Glory reasons that the Cornelian cheek" is an absolute ban on violence "insofar as the only relevant factors in the case are an injury to me by my neighbor and a desire on my part to retaliate." However, suggested Lewis, there are implicit exceptions when the issue becomes more than just a person's desire to retaliate for a past injury. Lewis disputes that Jesus meant "that the best way of bringing up a child was to let it hit its parents whenever it was in a temper or, when it had grabbed the jam, to give it the honey also." If you are "a magistrate struck by a private person, a parent struck by a child, a teacher by a scholar, a same man by a lunatic or a soldier by the public enemy; your duties may be very different," because one must never resist evil. The non-resistance argument, when analyzed carefully, falls apart.

Early in Jesus' ministry, he told the disciples, "I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road." (Luke 10:3-4, English Standard Version) At the Last Supper, Jesus gave his final instructions to the apostles, and revoked the previous order about not carrying useful items. He asked, "When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," the apostles replied. Jesus continued: "But now, let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let

THE NOTION THAT "TURN THE OTHER CHEEK" CAN BE EXTRAPOLATED INTO AN INFLEXIBLE RULE RUNS INTO A VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM. JESUS QUITE OBVIOUSLY DID NOT CONSIDER HIS ADVICE ABOUT SLAPPED CHEEKS TO BE A MANDATORY LEGAL CODE OF CHRISTIAN CONDUCT.

Jesus was not setting up a rule that every apostle must carry a sword (or a purse or a bag). For the eleven, two swords were "enough." The broader point being made by Jesus was that the apostles would, after Jesus was gone, have to take care of their own worldly needs to some degree. The moneybag, the knapsack (generally used to carry clothing and food) and the sword (generally used for protection against the robbers who preyed on travelers, including missionaries, in the open country between towns) are all examples of tools used to take care of such needs.

This passage does show that two of the apostles carried swords while they were following Jesus. And rather...
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The most immediate meaning of these passages is that Jesus was preventing interference with God’s plan for the arrest, trial and crucifixion. Additionally, it could be argued that Jesus was instructing the apostles not to begin an armed revolt against the local dictatorship or the Roman imperialists.

Do the passages also suggest a general prohibition against using swords (or other weapons) for defense? The versions of the story recounted in the books of Luke and John do not, but the version in Matthew could be so read. If Matthew is analyzed along the lines of “He who lives by the sword will die by the sword,” the passage is an admonition that a person, such as a gangster, who centers his life on violence will likely perish. Notice that Jesus told Peter “Put up thy sword into the sheath.” Jesus did not tell Peter to get rid of a sword. Rather, Jesus told Peter to put the sword back in the place where swords are customarily put. As Jesus had instructed in the last of the Last Supper, Peter would continue to carry the sword, having been warned by Jesus against the impetuous use of the sword. When Peter put his sword back in its place, Peter was no more than a disarmed man who puts a handgun back into its place (in a holster). (This point is made by Patrick and John Henry. The Bible and Gun Control, www.alpinesuservival.com/ bibleguncontrol.pdf.)

If the single line in Matthew were to be read to indicate that drawing the sword is always wrong, then it would be impossible to account for the other passages which suggest that a Christian can be a soldier, because a soldier necessarily carries and uses the sword. It would likewise be impossible to account for Jesus’ order at the Last Supper that the apostles carry swords.

Putting the passage from Matthew in the context of the rest of the Bible would, therefore, look to the passage as a warning against violence as a way of life, rather than as a flat-out ban on defensive violence in all situations. Jesus was preventing interference with God’s plan for the arrest, trial and crucifixion. Additionally, it could be argued that Jesus was instructing the apostles not to begin an armed revolt against the local dictatorship or the Roman imperialists.

In the Book of John, Jesus said, “Put up thy sword into the sheath.” Jesus did not refuse to use weapons to protect him from torture and execution. The essence of many pacifist arguments is that all Christians are bound to follow Jesus’ example in submitting to unjust death, rather than to engage in violent resistance. The argument is difficult to sustain. Jesus could have run away from the soldiers, but Jesus chose not to run away. Does Jesus’ choice not to use the legal process to resist state torture and execution prove that a Christian should not run away from a wild animal or a person trying to kill him or her? Of course not. Indeed, Jesus advancing the argument that when they were persecuted, they should flee to another town.

Jesus could have prayed for angelic rescue, but he refused to do so. Does Jesus’ choice prove that a Christian cannot pray for a miraculous rescue from peril? Of course not. When Peter was imprisoned by King Herod, who planned to have Peter executed, people prayed for Peter; an angel appeared to Peter in his cell, removed his chains and led him out of prison and to a Christian safe-house. (Acts 12:1-19)

So even though Jesus, on one very unique occasion, chose not to resist by fleeing or praying, there is no generally applicable moral rule that Christians should not use flight or prayer in order to escape death.

Jesus continued to refuse to defend himself when he was brought to trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin and then the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. The Gospels repeatedly show Jesus humiliating the authorities when he faced them in verbal combat. We have little reason to doubt that Jesus could have out-argued his prosecutors, had he chosen to do so.

If the example of Jesus refusing to save himself through armed resistance is to be taken as a moral imperative for persons in completely different situations, then the example of Jesus refusing legal resistance must likewise be considered equally binding.

Yet in fact, no one claims that accused prisoners should follow the example of Jesus and fail to use the legal process to resist state punishment. When persecuted, Paul invoked his legal rights as a Roman citizen. (Acts 22:22-23, 28:36-37) Besides asserting procedural rights, Paul (unlike Jesus) proclaimed his innocence of the substantive charges against him at four separate trials. (Acts 23:1-25) In what way could Paul’s decision not to use legal process in order to resist an unjust government, was obviously, not a precedent to be imposed on all Christians. It is illogical not resisting by fleeing, not resisting by praying, not violently resisting arrest, not resisting by praying and not resisting prosecution were five ways in which Jesus voluntarily accepted crucifixion. Of these five ways in which Jesus did not resist, there is one—only one—that pacifist claim to be the normative rule for all Christians. It is illogical to single out Jesus’ decision not to use arms in order to resist an unjust government. Either all of Jesus’ forms of non-resistance are binding examples for Christians, or none of them are.

Only a few hours before Jesus was arrested and he refused armed aid, his last instruction to the apostles was that they should start carrying arms. It seems plain indeed that Jesus was refusing arms in a particular situation, not imposing a rule on mankind.

A few hours after the final instructions to the apostles, soldiers arrived to arrest Jesus. Peter, the leader of the disciples, sliced off the ear of one of their officers; Jesus then healed the ear, and said, “No more of this.” (Luke 22:49-51) According to the Book of John, Jesus said, “Put up thy sword into the sheath.” Jesus did not tell Peter to get rid of a sword. Rather, Jesus told Peter to put the sword back in its place where swords are customarily put. As Jesus had instructed in the last of the Last Supper, Peter would continue to carry the sword, having been warned by Jesus against the impetuous use of the sword. When Peter put his sword back in its place, Peter was no more than a disarmed man who puts a handgun back into its place (in a holster). (This point is made by Patrick and John Henry. The Bible and Gun Control, www.alpinesuservival.com/bibleguncontrol.pdf.)

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