

# Armed and Ready

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How do you feel about all the violence in our world? Safe? Threatened? Worried? Angry? Vindictive (that means “wanting to get even”)?

I confess that I have felt all of those things at various times. Parts of the world seems like they are in a constant war, a reign of terror, with never-ending violence, murder, bloodshed, massacre, and purges. It is so great to see some success stories like the peace that finally broke out in Ireland. But so many other places seem to have a “violence gene” they can’t control. Have you ever wondered why this is? Have you ever read any in-depth accounts of the history of these conflicts, like in Africa or the Balkans? It is always better to do some reading and learn from people with extensive life experiences in these places --- than allow your views to be shaped by the simplistic, ignorant, opinionated loudmouths (of whatever persuasion) on radio and television. Wouldn’t you agree? But that’s another topic.

So the world is a powder keg and it is no longer just hostile nations we have to fear but hostile terrorists. What a mess.

And that’s not all. Look at all the gun-toting thugs, gangs, crooks, and kooks on our streets today. Just about every day we read of horrible shootings, killings, and gun fights not far from where we live. Somebody walked into a church and started firing a gun during worship a couple weeks ago, maybe five miles from my house. A gun slinger goes on to a college campus or a high school or into a business and starts shooting people by the dozen. How do you feel about that?

I confess that I have at times found a certain satisfaction in a Clint Eastwood “Dirty Harry” type vengeance film. “Do you feel lucky today, punk?” “Go ahead, make my day” --- historic lines from Clint. The recent anti-Nazi fantasy vengeance film “Inglorious Basterds” played on similar chords. There is something in our nature that enjoys seeing the bad guys pay. What part of our nature that appeals to, though, is another matter. Have you ever thought about that? How do you think Jesus would feel and respond looking at our violent world? Have you ever asked this question?

## Annie (and Andy) Get Your Gun

So we live in a violent, threatening world. What shall we do? In particular, what shall we Christians contribute to the situation? I’m not asking what we should do as Republicans . . . or Democrats. . . or Americans . . . or NRA members . . . or gated community suburbanite . . . or urban city dwellers. That is for others to ask of you. My question is what do you and I do in our role as ambassadors for Christ and his kingdom, as “ministers of reconciliation”? What is our contribution in the name of Jesus our Lord?

Are Christians free to interpret/re-interpret/misinterpret the teaching of Jesus and Scripture to suit their personal or political or economic interests and instincts? I don’t think so. Do you think it is ok to associate the Gospel of Jesus Christ with worldly weaponry? Apparently one company thinks it is fine. Maybe you read in January about the Michigan defense contractor Trijicon of Wixom, Michigan, which has been stamping Bible references like “JOHN8:12” (“I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life”) and “2COR4:6” (“For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”) on raised lettering at the end of the stock number on Trijicon’s rifle sights. Trijicon’s sights use tritium, a radioactive form of hydrogen, to create light and help shooters hit what they have been aiming for (*Associated Press*, 20 Jan 2010). The Defense Department is a major customer of Trijicon. In 2009 the Marine Corps signed deals worth \$66 million for Trijicon products. These weapons sometimes get left behind in battles with Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. What a witness to the Muslim community!

Or did you read last year about Pastor Ken Pagano of New Bethel Church (Assembly of God) in Louisville, Kentucky and his “bring your gun to church” celebration? Reverend Pagano simplified American history for his followers: “but for a deep-seated belief in God and firearms this country would not be here today.” And the Reverend showed his knowledge of Jesus and Scripture by saying “When someone from within the church tells me that being a Christian and having firearms are contradictions, that they’re incompatible with the Gospel ---- baloney! . . . The issue now is the Gospel. So in a sense it does become a crusade. Now the Gospel is at stake” (*New York Times*, 29 June 2009).

Clearly there are people claiming to be Christians, even pastors, who like the idea of responding to the violence of our world with more violence – counter violence (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) or even preemptive violence (“threaten me and I’ll take your eye before you can get mine”).

Let us pray: “Oh Lord Jesus, will you help me kill and maim these enemies.” “In the name of the man who died on the cross to forgive my sin, my temper, my own violence, I now blow you, oh stranger who scares me, to kingdom come.”

I don’t think so.

### **Armed & Ready . . . Who Decides for Us?**

Actually, I am not particularly interested in arguing about the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which says: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” No problem with “a well-regulated Militia protecting the security of our free state.” It’s the free-lance gun-slingers, gangs, and angry fanatics who worry me. But yes, let’s allow our well-regulated militia to keep and bear arms.

But as I said, that’s not my concern.

My concern is about the “constitution” of the kingdom of God, the church of Jesus Christ --- not so much about Tom Paine, Tom Jefferson, and Ben Franklin’s republic. Part of our confusion in today’s Christian community is a result of the failure to recognize the difference between the kingdom of God (a worldwide fellowship of believers under the presidency of Jesus Christ, having the Bible as its constitution) and the kingdoms of this world, like the USA or Uganda or Pakistan.

### **Listening to Jesus: Is He Going to Be Lord Here?**

Jesus was pretty clear in the following three passages which are typical of his teaching on living in a violent world:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. . . . ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:7-10). Did you get that mercy, peacemaking, accept persecution message?

“You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; . . . ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:38-45). Did you see that “no retaliation/love your enemy” message?

“Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt 26:50-53). Did you get it that Jesus didn’t want violence used on his behalf? That he could get an army to use violence but decided not to go that route?

## **Any Chance We Might Listen to St. Paul on this Topic?**

And just in case we think that Paul changed the message after Jesus was crucified, here are two clear statements:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil . . . If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:14-21). Did you get that no retaliation, no vengeance – do good to bad people message?

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Ephesians 6: 10-17).

## **Get Your Weapons Out and Fight On!**

So in the end we have a choice: will we Christians renounce the world and stand with Jesus Christ – or will we sell out our Lord and just conform to our violent world? I like what my mentor Jacques Ellul wrote in his book *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*: if any of us ever feels that we must get some worldly weapons and attack (he was thinking of a tough case like killing Nazis when they occupied France in the Forties) – at the very least let’s not trash the name of Jesus by dragging him into it. Let’s say “we did it because we were afraid” or “we did it because we hate Nazis.” Let’s not claim to be killing in the name of Jesus Christ or on his behalf. You just cannot know that or claim it in any responsible way.

Meantime, Christians are not called to passivity in the face of evil. That is not the alternative. But our contribution is to do battle with the principalities and powers, the demonic and structural forces (like Mammon) that ravage our planet every day. To fight on in this battle, which no one but a Christian can engage, it will take the “belt of truth” . . . “the breastplate of righteousness” . . . “shoes [enabling proclamation of] the gospel of peace” . . . “the shield of faith” . . . “the helmet of salvation” . . . and “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Ephesians 6: 10-17).

“Truth, righteousness/justice, peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God” ---- these are our weapons, not AK-47s, rifles, and pistols, not attack dogs, not drone bombers. Is there any pastor anywhere who will initiate a draft (or even a volunteer army) in which Christian men and women are instructed in combat techniques using “Truth, righteousness/justice, peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God” in our violent culture? Will some pastors somewhere ask for a volunteer army to stand up in a church service and make a commitment to the army of the kingdom of God?