
Bearing Arms

In 1689, in England, Parliament passed a law which said that all citizens had the right to bear arms. In the previous year England had experienced what has become known as the Glorious Revolution. King James II (not the one who authorized the production of the King James Bible), who was a staunch Roman Catholic, had turned against the Protestants in England developing policies which made their lives difficult. The Protestants rose up in revolt and, mostly without use of weapons and violence (thus named the Glorious Revolution), managed to reduce his power and give increased power to the Parliament. This marked a significant turning point in the British Isles, for since that day the monarchy has been subject to the rulings of Parliament.

In 1689, Parliament recognized that the king (or queen) could become tyrannical and destroy those who disagreed with them. To prevent tyranny, Parliament gave all citizens the right to bear arms against tyrannical, even to the point of overthrowing the monarchy by force. It should be noted that the idea of bearing arms was not original, for three quarters of a century earlier, Queen Elizabeth I had given common citizens the right to bear arms, effectively making all citizens into soldiers should the need arise. Her militia of citizens did not take hold, but the idea of citizens bearing arms did.

The Second Amendment of the US Constitution gives its citizens the right to bear arms, and for many of the same reasons as was found in British law. When first introduced, citizens were given the right to bear arms for the defense of the nation, to check federal tyranny, and to bring a balance of power to the nation by distributing the power of the sword among the people, the fifty states, and the federal government. Over the years the Supreme Court extended the right of a citizen (note that non-citizens are not necessarily included) to bear arms to protect him/herself from harm or attack.

We should note that in Canada there is no constitutional right given to Canadians to bear arms and the Supreme Court has also said that there is no constitutional right for a Canadian even to own a gun. The discussion in Canada has been centred around the right to own a gun, not the right to bear arms. It is important to realize that these are two very different things. Even if Canadians have the ability to own a gun, they do not have the right to bear arms as was enshrined in law in both England and the United States. (We should note that England has changed its laws, and its citizens no longer have the right to bear arms and owning a gun is considered a privilege.)

People who make the argument that they have the right to own a gun often argue that they would use the gun only at a gun range or to shoot varmints such as coyotes or bears. They also argue that hunting is a sport, and hunting requires one to carry a weapon, usually a gun. Rarely, if ever, do we hear people advocating for the right to bear arms as we might understand that phrase in the traditional sense. The right to bear arms also gives the bearer of the weapon to shoot to death another person. In other words, the right to bear arms supposes that the weapon will be used against another human being if the circumstances might warrant such action.

I suspect that most of those who advocate for gun ownership do not want to get into the debate about bearing arms, although, I suppose, some would say that they should have the right to defend themselves. They might be less likely inclined to say that the right to bear arms includes gathering a militia to attack the federal government if they perceive it has become too tyrannical.

The question we have to ask as Christians is this: does Scripture give room for us to bear arms either for self-defense or to overthrow a tyrannical government? Most of the “proof” for the right to bear arms for these reasons would come from the Old Testament, but we must be careful not to use the Old Testament laws in the New Testament context without carefully considering their context and purpose. (Those who advocate for Christian Nationalism, whereby they are advocating that a nation become like Old Testament Israel, tend to forget that the church is the continuation of God’s people of the Old Testament and not a particular contemporary nation.) It may be entirely inappropriate to apply Old Testament civil laws to current civil situations.

In the New Testament, we do see an ethic which seems to advocate against bearing arms with the intent to kill another person either because they are tyrannical or for reasons of self-defense. For example, Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, and in the context, he seems to be implying that this was also true in their response to the tyrannical Roman government. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that Scripture teaches us that it is God who has the task of avenging us if we think that revenge is called for. In fact, a quick study of the entire Bible indicates that God is the one who has the authority to avenge and when people engage in vengeance, they are usually in the wrong. We also note that the New Testament church’s response to the tyrannical behaviour on the part of the government was not to throw together a militia and attack the local authorities. When James was killed by Herod in Jerusalem (Acts 12), and when Peter was subsequently arrested to be tried by Herod (and likely killed as well), the church did not gather weapons and attack Herod or try to free Peter from prison. Rather, the church gathered to pray, and God answered their prayers, and Peter was freed. Herod, by the way, shortly after, died because worms of some sort had infested his body. And, of course, when Jesus was arrested and Peter took out his sword, cutting off a man’s ear, Jesus rebuked him and told him that his desire to exercise his right to attack a tyrannical government was out of line.

It does seem, as we read the Bible, that as Christians we should carefully question laws that would give people the right to kill other people even if their killing might seem justified. Gun ownership can be debated, for a gun can be used as a tool, just like we might use a welder or a hammer. Bearing arms, though espoused by many, including many Christians, should be carefully examined in the light of Scripture, and the question must be asked: is this what Jesus intended his followers to do? As we know, just because something may be legal does not make it right.

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