
“Bring Your Pieces to Church” Sunday

By Joel McDurmon | Published: April 23, 2010

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Imagine the following scenario: At church this Sunday, while reviewing the list of announcements and upcoming events for your church, your pastor added, “Oh, and don’t forget: on Sundays we have our regular target practice. Make sure to bring your rifles. Make sure to *bring your pieces to church.*”

Absurd, right? Not so. It used to be the American way. For example, a 1631 law in Virginia required citizens to own firearms, to engage in practice with them, and to do so publicly on holy days. It demanded that the people “bring their pieces to the church.” Somewhere along the line we have lost this mindset. Today the ideas of church and arms are assumed to be at odds, as if loving your neighbor has nothing to do with the preservation and defense of life and property.

But the idea of Christian society and an armed, skilled populace actually have deep historical roots. Alfred the Great codified the laws of England in the 9th Century, often resorting to biblical law in order to do so (where he departed from biblical law, the integrity of his famous law code is quite poor). Alfred applied the Deuteronomic laws of kings that forbade a standing army (Deut. 17), and as a result developed a national defense based on militia:

By the Saxon laws, every freeman of an age capable of bearing arms, and not incapacitated by any bodily infirmity, was in case of a foreign invasion, internal insurrection, or other emergency, obliged to join the army....[1]

This required and encouraged an armed citizenry:

Every landholder was obliged to keep armor and weapons according to his rank and possessions; these he might neither sell, lend, nor pledge, nor even alienate from his heirs. In order to instruct them in the use of arms, they had their stated times for performing their military exercise; and once in a year, usually in the spring, there was a general review of arms, throughout each county.[2]

Imagine! Imagine the government poking its nose in every year not to register and license weapons for possible future confiscation, but to ensure that each house indeed possessed weapons. Imagine that instead of imposing fees for licensing schemes, the government levied fines for *not* owning a firearm. This was the case in Massachusetts in 1644. The state required that “every freeman or other inhabitant of this colony provide for himself and each under him able bear arms a sufficient musket and other serviceable piece” as well as “two pounds of powder and ten pounds of bullets.”[3] Those who neglected this duty could receive fines up to ten shillings (for laborers, roughly a day’s wages).

In 1623, Virginia statute forbade anyone to travel unless they were “well armed,” and required that all men working in fields likewise be armed.[4] 1631 laws repeated the same requirements and added to them: all able men should bear arms *and* engage in practice with their arms. The law specifically required “All men that are fitting to bear arms,” and to “bring their pieces to the church upon pain of every offence.”[5] (Equally shocking to most modern evangelicals is the fine for not obeying these laws: landowners who did not so arm

their laborers and workers were required “to pay 2 lbs. of tobacco,” and this fine in tobacco was “to be disposed by the church-wardens, who shall levy it by distress...”[6]

Imagine that: the government *desiring, commanding* that every able citizen own weapons *and* be skilled in using them! And to do so on “holy days” and at Church.[7] (It’s even more unbelievable that the government assumed all men were going to church every Sunday. Perhaps we could increase their numbers if we could reinstate target practice fellowship.)

The legacy of arms and freedom as Christian virtues continued into American Revolution. The Lutheran pastor John Peter Muhlenberg is perhaps the most famous of the “fighting parsons.” He answered George Washington’s personal call to raise troops using his own pulpit and Ecclesiastes 3 to do so. Other ministers of the gospel were well known to preach with loaded guns in the pulpit with them. Pennsylvania preacher John Elder provides a great example: “Commissioned a captain by the Pennsylvania government, he led a company of rangers and was accustomed to preach with his loaded musket across the pulpit.”[8] Likewise, Rev. Thomas Allen, a later collaborator in writing the Massachusetts State Constitution, himself fired the first shot at the Battle of Bennington. In the context of the War for Independence, ministers saw guns as tools of liberty and defense against tyranny.

In a later context, some ministers saw the continued usefulness of firearms. A former cowboy and confederate soldier turned Methodist circuit rider, Rev. Andrew Jackson Potter, preached among tough neighborhoods in the old West. He would regularly walk up, lay his two colt revolvers across the pulpit, and begin to preach. He retained order and security, and encouraged an atmosphere of respect. In this scenario, arms served less as tools of national liberty and more as tools of preservation of life and individual liberty and property.

This same scenario goes on today, by the way. As recently as last fall, pastors in the Detroit area have begun to arms themselves in the pulpit and while on church property. Rises in Detroit crime in general as well as attacks in church buildings in particular have awakened the attention of many Christians. While it is illegal in most states to carry guns on church property, Michigan allows it for the pastor and those he approves.

Christians should be aware that the use of force in preservation of life is a biblical doctrine (Ex. 22:2–3; Prov. 24:10–12; Est. 8–9; Neh. 4; cp. John 15:13–14). Likewise, those who possessed weapons in Scripture are often said to be well skilled in the use of them (Judg. 20:15–16; 1 Chron. 12:1–2, 21–22). We can only surmise that 1) God gave them talent in this regard, and that 2) they engaged in target practice regularly. Further, under biblical law, to be disarmed was to be enslaved and led to a disruption of the economic order due to government regulations and monopolies (1 Sam 13:19–22). But the mere presence of a couple weapons had psychological effects that put criminals to flight (1 Sam 13). There is a reason why Scripture tells these stories: they illustrate the defense of life, liberty, and property in the midst of a fallen world (and fallen governments).

The American Second Amendment did not spring into existence from nowhere. It had a long pedigree. The Christian society emerging from the old laws of Alfred continued to include the ideal of an armed populace as a means of securing human liberties. The Founders, many of them lawyers, had studied that legal tradition and would have read William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–1769). The first part of the first volume elaborates on the subject of our “principal absolute rights... of personal security, personal liberty, and private property [i.e. life, liberty, and property].” It then covers five means of securing and protecting these rights “inviolable”:

The fifth and last auxiliary right of the subject, that I shall at present mention, is that of having arms for their defence, suitable to their condition and degree, and such as are allowed by law. Which is also declared by the same statute I W. & M. st.2. c.2. and is indeed a public allowance, under due restrictions, of *the natural right of resistance and self-preservation, when the*

sanctions of society and laws are found insufficient to restrain the violence of oppression.[9]

Within that same legal tradition, and more than a generation earlier, the English philosopher John Locke voiced the sanctity of life, liberty, and property as well as our duty even to use force to preserve it:

Every one, as he is *bound to preserve himself*... so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, *to preserve the rest of mankind*, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.

Locke elaborated these views within the context of belief in God's ultimate sovereignty, ownership, and law-order over all of creation:

being all *equal and independent*, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by *his* order, and about *his* business; they are *his* property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during *his*, not one another's pleasure...[10]

Thomas Jefferson clearly took his phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" from Locke, likely via Blackstone. It is no irony that Jefferson kept a portrait of Locke on his parlor wall. Both hated tyranny, and saw freedom as requiring the defense of person and property via use of force if necessary. Both derived this from the Christian legal tradition they inherited.

Today Christians are so brainwashed and affected by progressive propaganda that we have an uneasy feeling even broaching the subject of guns. Constant liberalism in the media and years of government-school indoctrination have eroded the foundations of liberty in this nation. Today Christians think themselves conservative when they back everything the military does. Conservatives think that to oppose the military is to be a leftist. They have no idea that 1) the tradition of imperialistic war grows out of liberal, not conservative, ideology, and 2) the Bible forbids nations to have standing armies or stockpile offensive weapons. The Bible calls for national defense through an armed populace and militia upon necessity. A standing army is an affront to God. But for some reason, alleged conservative politicians easily persuade Christian voters that the next military maneuver is of necessity an expression of conservative values, and the Christians cheer.

We are further brainwashed into thinking (and feeling) that guns are somehow dirty and evil, and that Christians should have nothing to do with them. In this view, we have departed from the Scriptures, Christian legal history, as well as America's Christian history.

As a remedy for the situation, we should both learn and exercise our gun rights. This article provides merely a beginning of the necessary education. We need much more. Every Christian should read and understand the laws of their particular state. Good places to start are www.handgunlaw.us and opencarry.org (the former site includes coverage of concealed carry laws; the latter deals mainly with open carry). Not only should you know about laws pertaining directly to carrying, but also to those pertaining to the use of deadly force. These vary per state, and Christians should be aware.

But we should also begin to exercise our inviolable rights. Every able Christian should own a firearm, and each should seek instruction and training in how to use them. This includes handguns, shotguns, and rifles, each of which has a particular strength in self- and home-defense. Elders and pastors should teach on the topic and its history, and should help aid church members in obtaining fitting pieces and proper training in legal settings.

One great expression of both education and practice, I have recently learned, appears in the Applesed Project. These yearly training camps are steeped in American history and wish to advance the forgotten legacy of the American rifleman. Using focused and professional training events across the country, this project teaches and hones shooting skills toward the goal of making you accurate at 500 yards.

In addition to that great project, I recommend taking classes in handgun defense. These are offered by small gun shops and firing ranges around the country. Make use of them.

In states that oppress the inviolable right to bear arms, the best we can do is to organize politically and locally to change the laws. This is not easy, of course, but Christian society demands it as a measure to stop the tyranny of governments and the advance of individual crime. To allow unjust gun laws to continue unchallenged is to fail in loving your neighbor and to vote in favor of Egyptian and Philistine-style servitude. This, of course, demands its own article, but deserves at least mentioning here.

Christians need to understand and act upon these biblical ideals. While this article hardly provides the last word on the subject, we ignore the lessons of the Bible and history to the peril of our freedoms. Evil ever advances upon our families, churches, and states. Evil seeks positions of power, such as government, and from there seeks to eliminate the avenues of power that threaten it (an armed people). Thus tyrannical government seek to pass gun control laws. Wise Christians see past the propaganda and stand for freedom.

With relentless expression of our rights through education, publication, exercising the right, and challenging unjust laws, Christians can at least create a society hungrier for freedom. At best we may roll back the various infringements upon those freedoms. If we change the laws well enough, we may indeed once again hear pastor say, “Oh, and don’t forget: on Sundays we have our regular target practice. Make sure to *bring your pieces to church.*”

Endnotes:

1. Francis Grose, *Military Antiquities Respecting a History of the British Army, from the Conquest to the Present Time*, 2 vol. (London: Egerton and Kearsley, 1801), 1:1. [↔]
2. Francis Grose, *Military Antiquities*, 1:2. [↔]
3. William Brigham, ed., *The Compact with the Charter and Laws of the Colony of New Plymouth* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1836), 31. [↔]
4. William Hening, *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature in 1619*, (New York, 1823), 173–174, <http://vagenweb.org/hening/vol01-07.htm> (accessed April 22, 2010); I have modernized the English taken from this work. [↔]
5. William Hening, *The Statutes at Large*, 174, <http://vagenweb.org/hening/vol01-07.htm> (accessed April 22, 2010). [↔]
6. William Hening, *The Statutes at Large*, 174, <http://vagenweb.org/hening/vol01-07.htm> (accessed April 22, 2010). [↔]
7. William Hening, *The Statutes at Large*, 174–175, <http://vagenweb.org/hening/vol01-07.htm> (accessed April 22, 2010). [↔]
8. Louis B. Wright, “The Westward Advance of the Atlantic Frontier,” *The Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 11/3 (May 1948): 271 [↔]
9. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vol., 1:139. [↔]
10. *Two Treatises on Civil Government*, Book II, Chapter II, Sec. 6. [1689], <http://www.lonang.com/exlibris/locke/loc-202.htm> (accessed April 22, 2010). [↔]

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