

Guns

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"Want to see my AK-47?"

What?! I thought. "Are those things even legal Bob?" He had multiple and seemingly contradictory answers ready. "Oh yeah. It's only got a 10-bullet clip. It's made in China. Plus I got it at a gun show."

The first rationale for legality was the only one that mattered. But that was before the expiration of the automatic weapon ban some weeks ago now. Today someone could much more easily purchase the civilian version of a military-style assault rifle with far more than ten bullets and have that ready to show their presumably liberal, anti-gun preacher when he comes over.

Having lived and preached among avid gun-owners I am more sympathetic with their arguments than I once was. Bob knows how to handle guns. They're stored properly, locked in a safe where thieves (or even he) couldn't get them if his house were robbed. Bob is ex-military and knows from experience how dangerous such weapons are, and how important it is to use them properly. He and many of his friends hunt. Some of them don't hunt for more deer than they'll eat in a given winter. The world will not be less safe if Bob can have more firepower—strange as it is to hear myself say that.

Once when a rabid raccoon attacked one of our dogs I asked another community member if I should buy a rifle of some sort. He looked me up and down and regarded me bemusedly. "Naw, you'd just hurt yourself or someone else. If you have another attack raccoon just call me." I would have. Perhaps the community was even safer than it would have been without Bob's gun ownership. Of course with an AK-47 with 10 bullets or now with one with 30 Bob could mow down a brigade of attack raccoons marching in Napoleonic military formation. At least that's one less thing to worry about.

There is a more frightening variety of gun-owner than Bob, however—even as frightening as he is to many who could never imagine having such a person as a neighbor or friend (to them I should say that he was not even the best armed member of my church!). One who holds the world would be safer if everyone carried guns all the time, even military-style assault rifles, ready to use if threatened. Such advocates for a better-armed citizenry as a more peaceful one often champion those whose use of deadly force has stopped some criminal in his tracks, carefully ignoring cases where vigilante suburbanites have shot criminals in the back. These gun advocates must not be the targets or instigators of road rage nearly as often as I am. If Bob were in a shouting match with another driver in rush hour traffic (not likely in rural Caswell County, granted), he would have to go home, open his bomb-proof safe and return and find the offending party before doing damage to him. By the time he got home he'd be much more like to dive into the latest Soldier of Fortune than to go looking. But someone actually packing heat would only have to have a momentary lack of judgment to end any encounter violently—precisely the reason law enforcement groups so heavily favor bans on such weapons.

To a gun owner like Bob it should be obvious that an AK-47 is not necessary for hunting deer, or stopping burglars. It would actually be counter-productive to either activity. Who wants to eat an animal full of metal, or shoot up the home or family he claims to protect? Neither does one need "cop-killing" armor piercing bullets, nor the sort of rounds used by the D.C.-area sniper last year, that open a small hole in the front of their target but spread damage outward in a cone-shape so that the back of it is vaporized. Those maniacs reported a particular pleasure in watching that happen to the heads of their victims. To hear the gun lobby talk, the world would be safer if more people had such weapons. Yet

everyone has their limit on what they would allow people to buy. No one would agree that nuclear fissile material should be purchasable by individuals to arm them to the same degree as their governments, even if that was the goal of those writers of the second amendment who were understandably suspicious of the limiting of weapon-holding to the government.

This is where gun-owning advocates get fiercely indignant. Just because criminals do awful things with guns doesn't mean non-criminals shouldn't have them. In fact, if more of the good guys were well-armed, fewer of the bad guys could wreck the sort of havoc done in D.C. last year. As the bumper-sticker goes, "if you outlaw guns, only outlaws will have guns" (I never know if that claims "bad guys" don't respect

laws or that "good guys" will ignore such laws and become "outlaws" if they pass, but never mind). Just because the sniper misused an M-16-like gun last year doesn't mean Bob shouldn't be allowed to buy one, keep it in his safe, and show it to his preacher, does it?

Well, yes it does. Liberals and conservatives alike have political goals that involve prohibitions on "freedoms" of persons designed to make neighborhoods and the broader society. In my home town now dog-owners have to pick up their pets' piles. People cannot shoot fireworks at hours that will keep other people awake. I can't let my grass get so long or my house so raggedy that neighbors take offense, or lose value in their own homes. I gladly submit to such rules in hopes that the village of Skokie will be more neighborly. So it is at the county, state, federal, and international level. Good laws passed to have people live more neighborly are good things, and only a hair-brained notion of individual rights trumping every other issue at all times could allow someone to think otherwise. On every issue there must be some give and take between government regulation and individual liberty—if liberals trust the former too readily, conservatives defend the latter with a ferocity that makes the rest of us less inclined to see them better armed.

As Christians we can say something more. For we of all people should know that the difference between the "good guys" and the "bad guys" is often thin indeed. For if asked to identify the worst sinner among us, we know to point the finger at ourselves. When we hear of seemingly "normal" people who "just snap" and wield horrible violence, we know not to cluck our tongues but to pray "there but for the grace of God go I." Those whose lives rest on the claim that Christ died for sinners know better than to presume their own righteousness or ultimate goodness.

It is striking that even the most adamant of gun-owners would likely be disinclined to carry on Sunday mornings. Though some churches have responded to laws allowing concealed handguns by posting "no guns allowed" stickers on the door, most have not seen the need. For it somehow doesn't seem right to carry a weapon in church. And not just because we can all think of board meetings that might have ended in carnage if there were easier access to firepower. Rather it is because in such a holy place we worship a God whose response to violence was not more violence, but submission to his cross and forgiveness of his enemies. Now, if only we could extend the most basic of Sunday School lessons—that acting like a Christian cannot be limited to Sunday mornings—we would have to treat this issue differently.

It has historically been a minority position in the church to claim that all violence must be foresworn for Christians to imitate a savior whose exemplification of love of enemies included submitting to their worst. It did not go well when I preached such a position to Bob and his fellow church members. Yet Christians of all stripes cannot do other than agree with the psalmist, “no king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save” (Psalm 33:17). Whatever we may say about giving more people access to more firepower, we must not speak of weapons in salvific terms. For Christians know there is greater strength in reconciliation than recrimination, in forgiveness than revenge, in peace than violence. May our common life demonstrate this to a skeptical world.