

A Texas church's real talk about guns

What do our baptismal vows have to do with safety?

First Person

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There's an old story from church history about a Roman emperor who ordered his legions to be baptized as Christian en masse. Down into the waters they went—except for their right hands, their sword hands, which they held out of the water. I've heard that story many times, and it's attributed to one emperor or another, but it's always been used to make the point that each of us tends to reserve something in our lives that we do not give over to the Lordship of Christ.

The story came up again in a conversation I had in a restaurant with a fellow who was just sitting down as I was leaving. We got to talking about church security in the aftermath of the shooting at Sutherland Springs Baptist Church in South Texas, and about how different churches in town were responding. Some churches were arming

their ushers, he said, but most of the ones he knew were content in knowing that many people in the congregation were armed on Sunday mornings.

I brought up the baptism story. He responded with an interpretation I've never heard before. "Maybe that means we can carry guns and be faithful Christians at the same time," he said. I knew he was a Baptist who was serious about his faith and who believed in full immersion baptism. Something from my Southern Baptist past bubbled up in my memory, and I said, "You know the old saying, 'Jesus is Lord of all or he's not Lord at all.'"

He responded, "I know, I know. But what are we going to do? We have to protect ourselves."

That's the question churches all over the country have been asking after Sutherland Springs. What are we going to do? We were asking that question also after the shootings at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, and I remember asking it after the Nickel Mines shooting back in 2006. Our own congregation was asking it as we gathered following Sutherland Springs for a conversation on church safety. We purposely chose to speak about safety rather than security as a way to tone down the conversation swirling about us, which is inundated with images of guns and guards in black uniforms. All that seems to be missing from those visions of security are sandbag emplacements at the front door and helicopters sweeping the perimeter of the church property.

Congregations are being offered security training for ushers and others. Some security firms offer free handgun training for clergy so pastors can be licensed to carry—on Sunday mornings, in the pulpit. There seems to be little understanding that carrying guns in church is, at the very least, an exception to Christian practice. Now it seems to be considered conforming to Christian teaching. Hands held up from the waters of baptism holding a gun are more and more considered orthodox.

When our congregation gathered, I gave a few introductory comments but for the most part simply moderated the discussion. People needed to talk. They needed to express their fears. Some were worried that our longtime countercultural witness was putting us too much in the spotlight and perhaps bringing us to the attention of some crazy person. Several people talked about how having children and grandchildren in the church changed their comfort level about who we are and what we do; while they were willing to put themselves at risk, they weren't willing to put

the children at risk. Even so, they were emphatic that being the church, the body of Christ, did not include guns.

Eventually, the conversation moved to practical matters. How many doors do we have open on Sunday mornings and what should we do about them? How many ushers do we have and should we increase the number? Where and how do we greet people on Sunday mornings? The biggest worry was about our nursery. We discussed how we might make it safer, whether by changing the doors, or adding locks, or adding more adult volunteers. Fortunately, we had a couple of church members who were familiar with studies on church safety, and they were able to share some perspectives with the rest of us.

Lots of humor surfaced, as it often does in tense times. The ushers loved the idea of getting clip-on walkie-talkies and earpieces so they could whisper into their lapels, "The pastor is now in the pulpit." The conversation went off the rails when different code names for the pastor were offered up: the Big Guy, Shepherd, the Robe, and others less complimentary. Someone mentioned that last year Texas rescinded an 1876 law forbidding the wearing of swords and bowie knives in public, so we could now outfit the ushers with swords. There was discussion of what kind of swords each usher might want. I wondered aloud if that meant I could wear my sword on the outside of my pulpit robe and maybe look like Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*. Maybe Gandalf could be my code name? Someone countered that Friar Tuck might be better.

The most interesting and gratifying part of the conversation from my perspective was how often foundational theological convictions kept coming up. Over and over again someone mentioned the practice of Christian hospitality. Because of Jesus we said we were committed to welcoming the stranger, and though it might be risky, we were committed to trying to be more safe within that theological framework. In fact, some church members talked about "enhanced hospitality" and "extreme welcoming." "Let's give everyone a 'holy hug' out on the front steps and do a pat-down at the same time" one person suggested. They were asking how might we build upon our convictions and live into the gifts God has given us rather than compromising them.

A longtime member stood up and reminded us that the heart of the issue was baptism. "When we are lowered into the waters, the pastor says, 'Buried with Christ in baptism,'" he said. "In other words, our lives are not our own. And when we come

up from the waters, the words said are, 'Raised to walk in newness of life.' This is no guarantee of a risk-free life. It's a guarantee that we are not alone when we walk the way of resurrection." His own wife spoke up, "We know that. But what about our grandchildren? Your grandchildren?"

We did not resolve those questions that night. I don't know if we ever will. But they have given us plenty to think about and pray about, plenty to live into. They have given me plenty to preach about. I think it is safe to say we will not be winning any church growth awards anytime soon. I also know that the next time I lower someone under the waters of baptism and say, "Buried with Christ," the whole congregation will be thinking about those words in ways we never used to.

A version of this article appears in the January 3 print edition under the title "Guns and baptism."