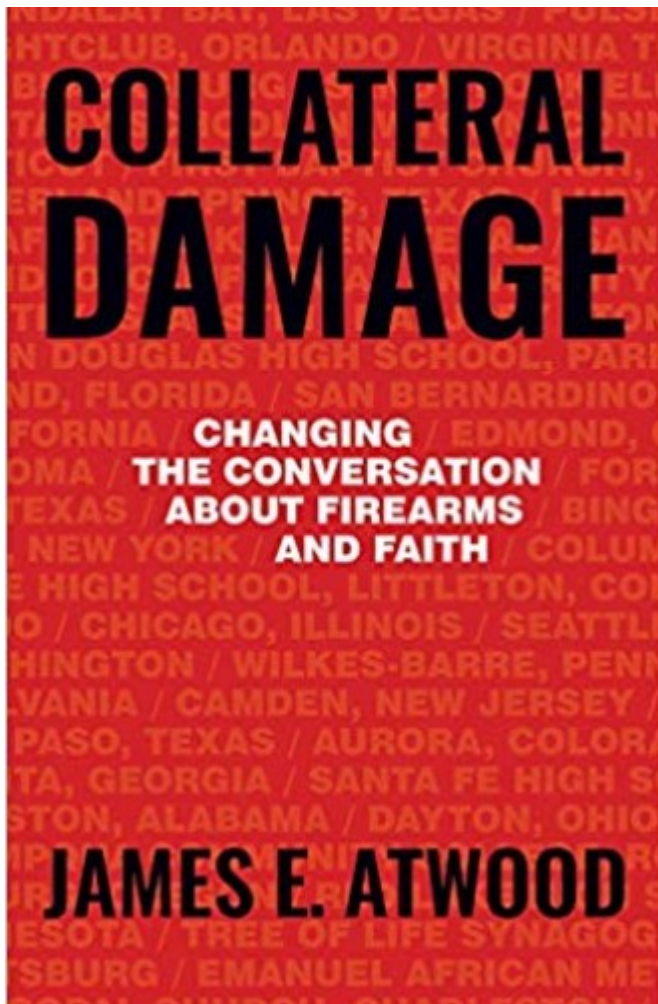


In bondage to guns

Life in America has been changed by gun culture.

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [October 23, 2019](#) issue

In Review

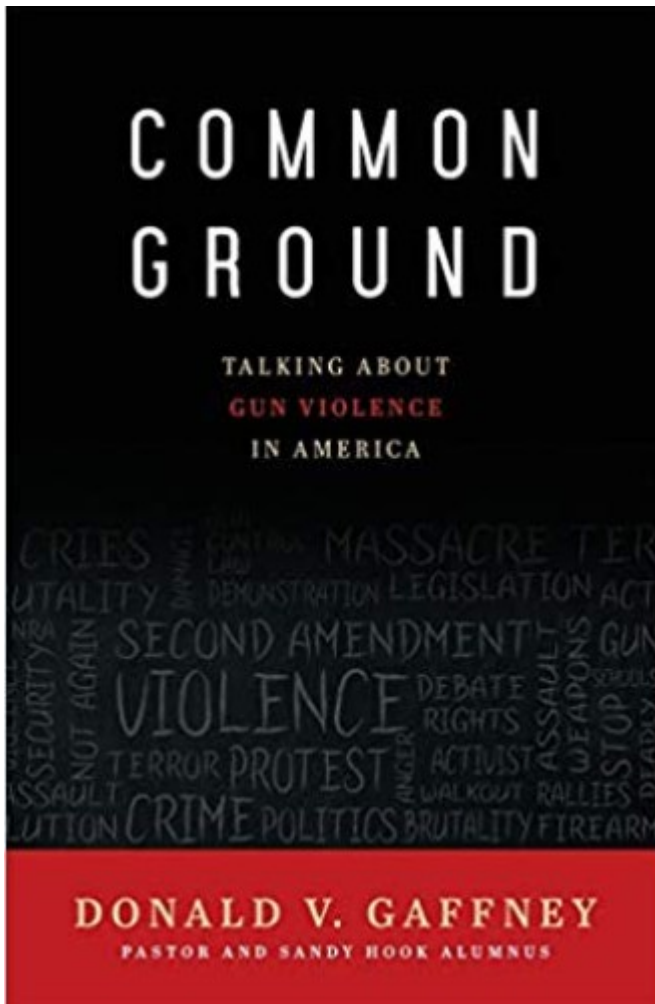


Collateral Damage

Changing the Conversation about Firearms and Faith

By James E. Atwood

Herald Press



Common Ground

Talking about Gun Violence in America

By Donald V. Gaffney
Westminster John Knox

I opened the car door and started to get out. “Where are you going?” asked my wife, her voice charged with anxiety.

“That guy just cut in the ferry line. Didn’t you see him? I’m going to tell him that’s not okay and that I’m calling his license plate in.”

“Don’t you dare,” she said. “Who knows, he might have a gun.”

That’s one (relatively minor but not inconsequential) example of what James Atwood calls “collateral damage.” Another, fairly laden with irony, is that the misconstrued

understanding of the Second Amendment promoted by the gun rights movement actually jeopardizes exercise of the First Amendment's right of freedom of speech. People are less likely to speak out at a public forum or demonstration if they think someone might be carrying a gun. And since every state in the nation now has some version of a concealed carry law, chances are pretty good that in a given crowd someone is carrying.

Atwood argues that damage from firearms in America runs deeper than most people imagine. Although we are all aware of the many people who die in mass shootings, that's only the tip of the iceberg. Some 40,000 people a year die in gun violence in a country where there are now 393 million firearms. And the horror doesn't stop with those who are killed. Those who survive incidents in schools and houses of worship and theaters are traumatized. The family and friends of victims of gun violence live the rest of their lives in a land of deep shadow.

Life in America has been changed by guns and gun violence, and not for the better. When I was a young father, it would not have occurred to me to ask a family that invited one of our kids over to play, "Do you have guns in your home, and if so, how are they secured?" As a grandparent I've learned that such questions are the new normal.

Beyond the physical and psychological costs, the economic ones are also significant. When Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007, the cost of law enforcement and subsequent legal and medical bills amounted to \$48.2 million. Atwood reports that the current estimate of the cost of gun violence in America is \$229 billion a year.

Donald Gaffney, like Atwood, is an ordained pastor. Both of their books are designed for use in churches and aim to help us have a sane conversation about one of our most polarizing issues. The two authors also have similar backgrounds: both grew up in farming communities with guns and hunting as part of their culture. Both are trying to understand a gun culture that is different from the one they grew up in.

But Gaffney also happens to be a native of Newtown, Connecticut, and an alumnus of Sandy Hook Elementary School. He begins his book by explaining how the mass shooting at his former school demanded his attention and self-examination. He then invites readers to similar self-examination as well as conversations with others.

Gaffney seems attracted to the idea of going back to the responsible gun culture of an earlier period in American history. But I'm not convinced that's possible. With 393 million guns in the US, there is now more than one firearm for every man, woman, and child in the country. More than 100 people die every day from gun violence, ten of them children. There are more gun dealers in the US than there are McDonalds, Starbucks, and supermarkets combined.

What happened? The transformation and political effectiveness of the National Rifle Association is a key part of the story. The way that organization morphed from one concerned with safety, education, and marksmanship—and which actually supported gun-control legislation—into one of radical “gundamentalists” (Atwood’s term) instantiates much of the change in America over the last 50 years.

In the early 1970s, moderates were removed from NRA leadership and replaced by single-minded gun rights zealots. This was the time of Black Power and gun-toting Black Panthers, a development that some people believe catalyzed the gun rights movement and the change in the NRA. It was also the time when the effects of changed immigration laws had begun to stir a backlash. How all this fermented together into a toxic brew is not easily teased apart, but the upshot is that legislation and enforcement related to guns became far less concerned with public safety and far more concerned with protecting gun owners, gun manufacturers, and those in the business of selling guns.

The NRA and its congressional allies became masters at blocking any reasonable legislation or real management of firearms. The first clause of the Second Amendment, “a well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State,” was severed from the second clause, “the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed,” and only the latter half stands as the motto of the NRA at its national headquarters.

Atwood pays more attention to the NRA and the politics of guns than Gaffney, but neither pays enough. Atwood devotes a chapter to the intersection of race and guns. Gaffney tends to focus more on issues that are likely to come up in churches, such as “violence and the Bible.”

What each does well is provide a framework for conversations in congregations. Gaffney helpfully includes questions for use in study groups. Even more importantly, both authors recognize how easy it is for people to surrender to despair about guns.

They write about their own motivations for being activists, share what keeps them going, and examine how faith can overcome despair. Neither pretends to have all the answers, but both are certain that silence about gun violence in the church and pulpit is not an option.

Finally, while both are concerned about creating and sustaining hard conversations about these issues in churches and elsewhere, neither stops there. Both write about particular actions people may take and name specific groups with which churches may ally. Both advocate for policies, including universal background checks (which are supported by 92 percent of Americans although not by President Trump or the NRA) and “red-flag” or “extreme risk” laws that allow police to remove guns from someone who shows signs of risk and instability.

These books are important for the church. Still, there remains—at least for me—a sense that when it comes to guns, what scripture calls “the principalities and powers” are exercising a demonic grip on our common life. A nation that considers itself the most powerful on earth is in bondage.