

ON THE  
QUESTION OF  
USING LETHAL  
FORCE TO  
DEFEND THE  
UNBORN

by  
Brian Gibson  
&  
James Vittitow

# POSITION ON THE USE OF LETHAL FORCE

Written: March 1994

Biography of speakers Revised: June 1996, July 1999



PART I

*By Brian Gibson*

Since the killing of David Gunn on March 10, 1993, a small contingent within the pro-life movement has vigorously promoted the concept of the use of lethal force against abortionists in the defense of preborn children. The idea being promoted is that unborn children should be or can be defended from being killed by abortion by inflicting mortal injury on the abortionist. On the surface, this argument may have some appeal, but by delving deeper into the intricacies of this issue we find quite the opposite.

Christians for the past two millennia have struggled with their role in defending innocent people from being attacked and killed, including themselves. Because of this struggle, we have a wealth of consistent thought that has been handed down to us through the centuries.

### **Response of the Early Church**

The early church responded to a violent pagan society with the love of Christ and by offering His holy peace. These courageous followers of Christ defended innocent children left to exposure, not with force or violence, but by hiding those in danger just as they had learned from the examples in scripture. (Rahab in Joshua 2:1-24, the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1:15-22, the disciples in Acts 9:23-25). So much did they take Christ at His word to love as He loves that they did not even defend themselves or others who were being attacked. These zealous followers of Christ vied for the privilege of being deemed worthy to suffer or be martyred for the sake of His holy name. The writings of the earliest church leaders, who immediately followed the apostles, reveal a Christianity that would not shed blood but fought with the weapons of peace. Clement of Alexandria, circa 150 - 220 A.D., wrote in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*,

"It is ever God's purpose to save the flock of mankind. For this cause

also the good God sent the good Shepherd. And the Word, having spread abroad the truth, showed to men the grandeur of salvation, in order that they may either be saved if they repent, or be judged if they neglect to obey. This is the preaching of righteousness; to those who obey, good news; to those who disobey, a means of judgement. But when the shrilling trumpet blows, it assembles the soldiers and proclaims war; and shall not Christ, think you, having breathed to the ends of the earth a song of peace, assemble the soldiers of peace that are His? Yes, and He did assemble, O man, by blood and by word His bloodless army, and to them He entrusted the kingdom of heaven. The trumpet of Christ is His gospel. He sounded it, and we heard. Let us gird ourselves with the armour of peace, 'putting on the breastplate of righteousness,' and taking up the shield of faith, and placing on our head the helmet of salvation; and let us sharpen 'the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.' Thus does the apostle marshal us in the ranks of peace. These are our invulnerable arms; equipped with these let us stand in array against the evil one.

During these first three centuries of Christianity, the church suffered under times of severe persecution yet never took up arms to defend even itself.

By the fourth century the concept of defending a just nation from attack by a pagan onslaught began to receive wide acceptance. Christianity had become recognized and protected by the Roman Empire. It quickly rose to the status of a state religion. Augustine of Hippo taught that under extreme circumstances Christians could engage in war for the purpose of defending a just society. About this same time the concept of defending oneself by using force if necessary became accepted, followed by the natural conclusion that defense of another also was allowed.

This teaching caused dilemmas for the Christian. First and foremost is the fact that a human being is killed, justifiable or not. Whether that human being has killed before and is about to kill again does not lessen the fact that we are called by Christ to love even our enemies. (What greater enemy do we have in the flesh than someone who is attempting

to kill us or someone we are called to love?) Second is what exactly justifies the killing of a human being.

In response to these dilemmas, a standard was formed throughout centuries of reflection on the scriptures and the life of Christ. By the fourteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, in the Summa Theologiae, put in writing the Christian position that had been perfected in the previous centuries. Eventually this became the standard for Western law and remains the undergirding of our laws to this day. Since the struggle to understand the use of force to defend oneself or another began with the early church and was perfected prior to the Protestant Reformation, it is not in the least surprising that Protestants and Catholics have the same view regarding the justification of killing.

### **Criteria Necessary to Justify Killing a Human Being**

For a Christian, the following criteria must be met in order to justify killing in defense of oneself or another (see Summa Theologiae II<sup>a</sup> - II<sup>ae</sup> q.64 art.7). The criteria are highlighted, followed by explanations in light of the shooting death of David Gunn.

1. **The force used to prohibit harm to an individual must be the least amount of force reasonably necessary to protect oneself or another.** Shooting an abortionist is not the least amount of force reasonably necessary to prevent the killing of preborn children. From blocking the abortionist at the killing center or his residence to cutting all power to the abortuary, methods of preventing the killing of defenseless children that do not include lethal force are limited only by our imaginations. (The preceding examples are cited for the purpose of illustration and all are not necessarily endorsed). In fact, we

know of abortionists who have not killed children on a particular day because of the presence of picketers or the threat of a rescue mission at their abortuaries.

2. **Stopping an act of aggression in defense of oneself or another must be with the moral certitude that harm will be inflicted upon that individual if force is not used.** We cannot know what is happening in the heart of a man as he goes into an abortuary on a particular day. At least one former abortionist has admitted that he went to kill children on a particular day, but once inside realized he could never do such a deed again. We do not know for certain that an abortionist will follow through with harming children prior to actually beginning to do so. By taking a position that accepts and/or promotes lethal force, as in the case of the shooting of David Gunn, we may be negating the salvific work of God in the heart and life of the sinner. The primary way that we can have moral certitude regarding an act of aggression is to be present when the aggression begins. In other words, the generally accepted understanding is that the defense of another is a spontaneous act while witnessing the aggression.
3. **The person preventing the harm to an individual cannot intend to inflict mortal injury on the aggressor.** Once again, our scriptural mandate to love even our enemies must be reconciled with the action taken to defend another. When intervening for the life of oneself or another, the Christian cannot want or intend to kill even if that is the result.

The above criteria cannot be taken separately. Even if the defender has moral certitude that harm will be inflicted by an aggressor, the other criteria cannot be ignored. They must all be taken together as one moral equation. In the case of the shooting and killing of David Gunn



by Michael Griffin, clearly all of the criteria were not met.

The Christian understanding of the use of lethal force to defend oneself or another is predicated on the fact that the act of aggression is illegal according to the lawful authority. Herein lies the tremendous difficulty for the Christian seeking to defend the unborn and fulfill our scriptural command to rescue those being led to the slaughter. The legal authority of our day has allowed for the killing of innocent, defenseless human beings. This assault on human life is the most serious inequity in many generations. Therefore, we have the obligation to seek remedies to this grievous injustice. But we may not fight evil with evil or inflict mortal injury to attain our goals. This further negates the arguments for the acceptance of the use of lethal force to defend the innocent unborn.

### **Just War and Revolution**

Questions surrounding the concepts of just war and revolution have been raised by those advocating lethal force. The following are a review of these concepts and why they do not apply to our current dilemma:

**Just War.** Augustine introduced the concept of a just war. Again, according to the writings of Aquinas (see *Summa Theologiae* II<sup>a</sup> - II<sup>ae</sup> q.40 arts.1-4), it is clear that the concept of a just war does not apply to the notion of using lethal force to defend others. In order for a war to be justified, the lawful political unit (the government), which has the authority and ability to organize an army, must be the one to declare war. It must be for a just cause and to bring about a good which is greater than the harm war will inflict.

**Revolution.** The conditions for revolution are extremely

stringent (see Summa Theologiae II<sup>a</sup> - II<sup>ae</sup> q.40 arts.1-4). If the governing body has become so corrupt, to the point of overwhelming tyranny toward its citizens, the Christian may organize to act against the government. This, though, cannot be undertaken by the Christian without reasonable certitude that the revolution will succeed. This requires that there be strong public support for the cause. Further, the harm inflicted by the revolution must be less than the good it will create. Even though the evil of abortion is deeply entrenched in our society, general tyranny is not the order of the day. We continue to have the opportunity and freedom to respond to the killing of children with openness and vigor.

To know and believe that taking lethal force against abortionists is illicit and therefore sinful does not in any way lessen our commitment or love for our unborn brothers and sisters. Those who equate this position with 'loving the murderer more than the babies' do grave harm to Christian truth and a disservice to this debate.

It should be noted that when others are inspired to act violently because of our words or deeds, we share some culpability for the action taken, just as when we inspire others to do good, that good is in part a credit to us. Therefore, those who accept or minimize the seriousness of the use of lethal force will share in the wrong committed if harm is done. This is truly a weighty matter to discuss and understand.

The Christian cannot simply accept the use of lethal force by others but not for himself. If the standards of defending oneself or another cannot be met, then the Christian must oppose the deadly action for himself and all others.

The struggle we face to rescue lives and change society is immense beyond what most Christians could have understood before taking up this struggle. Millions of defenseless and innocent lives continue to be lost to the false gods of our day. But in our zeal for righteousness we must take care not to enter into unrighteous acts. The battle before us is more formidable than ever. Let us be, to paraphrase Clement of Alexandria, soldiers of peace in the army of Christ our Lord which does not shed blood.

# PART II

*By James Vittitow*

It is our strong belief that the killing of abortionists is unequivocally wrong. In making this statement, we are concurring with traditional Christian thought on the subject of using lethal force and stating that the use of lethal force against abortionists cannot be justified because it does not meet the criteria of Christian teaching. That criteria being, namely, use of the least amount of force necessary; no intent beforehand to kill; and reasonable certitude that the result of the action taken will not create a worse evil than the one being acted against. This criteria is most clearly explained in the writing of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II<sup>a</sup> - II<sup>ae</sup> q.64 arts.1-8, and was expounded upon in *Pro-Life Action Ministries' Position on the Use of Lethal Force: Part I*.

Another reason why we do not believe that it is right to kill an abortionist is that it does not actually deal with the main threat to the baby's life which is the mother's intent to have him or her killed. This critical point is ignored by the many scenarios used to try to convince people that killing abortionists is justifiable. Many of the arguments for the use of lethal force include scenarios of ax-welding madmen and Dahmer and Bundy types coming after your kids, and then the question, "What would you do if some madman was trying to kill your kids or the neighbors' kids?" I would say that in these scenarios, yes, do whatever is necessary to protect your family.

The problem is, however, that in the case of abortion, you do not have a lone threat who is pursuing people with the criminal intent to kill. You have, in reality, a mother who has decided to kill her baby and so sets out and goes to a doctor and pays him to kill her baby. She does this with the complete backing and support of the government which has made abortion legal. Does killing the abortionist save the baby? Can't the woman just go to another abortionist? The woman is the cause of her baby's death and she uses the abortionist as her

accomplice. When a person is presented with scenarios to justify killing abortionists, one should ask, "Where is the mother in this scenario?"

This same question can be asked when scriptures are quoted to further justify the killing of abortionists. In particular, Exodus 2:12 and 22:2 are used as arguments for use of lethal force as a defensive action. They cannot, however, be rightly applied to the peculiar situation of abortion that involves a mother and not just a lone aggressor. In Exodus 2:12, Moses kills an Egyptian for mistreating an Israelite. But what would Moses do if he came upon an Israelite woman paying an Egyptian doctor to kill her unborn child? In order to save the child that day and the next he would have to deal with the woman. Exodus 22:2 deals only with the incidental killing of an intruder at night and cannot be directly applied to abortion. It is also important to remember that in these situations the deaths are not pre-meditated killings. This would not be true in the case of shooting an abortionist. Christians, as mentioned earlier, cannot pre-meditate the death of another. Whether a death inadvertently occurs while defending oneself or another is a different matter. Shooting an abortionist, by its very nature, is a pre-meditated act.

Often, the assertion is made that whatever you do for the born you should be willing to do for the unborn. If you are willing to use lethal force to defend your born children, you should be willing to use lethal force to defend somebody's unborn children. In reality, in defending anybody, you have to deal with the main threat to the person. In the case of abortion, that main threat is the mother.

To further illustrate this point - that killing the abortionist is wrong because one cannot know if it will actually save the baby - consider the

following analogy. Killing the abortionist is like trying to stop capital punishment by killing the man who pulls the switch to turn on the electric chair. In abortion the mother decides death for her child. In capital punishment a judge and jury decide death for the convicted person. If you are against capital punishment, you don't kill the executioners on the chance that the judge might change his mind and commute the sentence. You might plead with the judge to change his mind but you instinctively know that killing the executioner isn't going to save the life of the convicted. Similarly, pro-lifers can plead with the abortion-minded woman to change her mind through means such as sidewalk counseling and "rescues," but they should know that they cannot kill the abortionist because they speculate that it might prompt the woman to change her mind and not abort her baby.

Perhaps part of the problem lies with the focus on the abortionist as the weak link in the system. This is a good strategy except that it can influence a person to think that the abortionist is the lone threat, cause and problem. It ignores the culpability of the woman and, indeed, the culpability of the rest of society.

Once you take away the argument that killing abortionists is necessary to defend others, another argument arises. That argument is that pro-lifers should take it upon themselves to be God's avengers. As ludicrous as this sounds, there are some who would have us act as vigilantes to kill abortionists for their past crimes and probable future crimes. And again, various scriptures are quoted, particularly from the Old Testament, to reinforce this notion. St. Thomas Aquinas denounces this notion too (see *Summa Theologiae* II<sup>a</sup> - II<sup>ae</sup> q.64, art.3). He states, "Now the care of the common good is entrusted to persons of rank having public authority: wherefore they alone, and not private individuals, can lawfully put evildoers to death." In the same article

Augustine is quoted as saying, "A man who, without exercising public authority, kills an evildoer, shall be judged guilty of murder, and all the more, since he has dared to usurp a power which God has not given him."

As pro-life Christians who are struggling with a sense of helplessness in this battle, we must not let our frustration and anger cause us to sin. We are to follow the example and commandments of Christ. He did not call us to be avengers, but to be lambs among wolves. In Matthew 5:38-39, Jesus lays aside the Old Testament law of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and gives a new commandment of offering no resistance to injury. In Matthew 5:43-44, He again lays aside Old Testament teaching of hating your enemy and tells us to "love your enemy and pray for your persecutors." In Romans 12:19 we are told, "'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' says the Lord."

In every situation in the Gospels where lethal force is promoted by various people, it is rebuked by Jesus. In John 8:3-11, in the case of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus says to the crowd, "Let the man among you who has no sin be the first to cast a stone at her." In Luke 9:54-56, Jesus rebukes the Apostles for wanting to rain down fire on a Samaritan town. And in Matthew 26:52-53, Jesus rebukes Peter for using the sword.

We must remember that man's ways are not God's ways and although we may not understand why the Lord permits certain evils to continue, we must wait upon the Lord and trust in Him. The actions we take on behalf of the pre-born must remain within the example and teaching of Christ.

The grim truth is that in the final analysis, because abortion is legal, if



a woman is intent on killing her baby, a person cannot prevent her from doing so. This certainly does not excuse us from trying however. The realization of our personal helplessness against an evil so big should prompt us to turn even more fervently to God and pray without ceasing for His divine intervention to end abortion. It should also prompt us to seek God's help in making sure our witness to the humanity of the unborn is as complete as it can be in the sight of God.

*About the authors*

Brian Gibson is the executive director of Pro-Life Action Ministries. He has been active in the direct action/rescue movements within the pro-life movement since 1981 and a full-time leader since March, 1986. Brian has led thousands in prayer and organized scores of pastors for leading prayer outside abortuaries. He has spoken on behalf of the unborn at conferences with as many as 10,000 in attendance, at churches and church groups, pregnancy help center fundraisers and in media interviews on more than a thousand occasions.

James Vittitow, a former program director for Pro-Life Action Ministries, former programs director Human Life International and is currently residing in Virginia. Jim became active in the pro-life movement with Operation Rescue. He was a leader in the pro-life movement in the Dayton, Ohio area before coming to Minnesota and then onto Virginia.

Pro-Life Action Ministries has been actively working to defend the unborn in Minnesota since 1981. As of July 1999, more than 2,000 babies have been documented rescued from abortion by this ministry.

Pro-Life Action Ministries was founded to directly uphold the sanctity of human life threatened by abortion, infanticide and euthanasia by peaceful, non-violent means in keeping with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Published by:



***PRO-LIFE ACTION MINISTRIES***

*Stopping Abortion – One Life at a Time*

1163 Payne Ave.

St. Paul, MN 55130

(651) 771-1500

*Email:* [prolife@plam.org](mailto:prolife@plam.org)    *Web:* [www.plam.org](http://www.plam.org)