

A Gun Control Debate: Dr. Greg Bahnsen vs. Dr. James Atwood

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This debate was subtitled “A Debate Over Gun Control and Biblical Morality”. Does the Bible speak to the issue of gun control? One of the participants in this debate says, “Yes,” and the other says, “No.”

Dr. Greg Bahnsen is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and resident scholar at the Southern California Center for Christian Studies. Dr. James Atwood is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and serves on the board of a handgun control lobby in Washington D.C.

The actual question debated was: “Is the civil regulation of firearms the scriptural norm for civil government?” The format of the debate included opening statements from both speakers followed by responses. There was an opportunity for each speaker to ask questions of the other with opportunity for a response. After closing remarks by the speakers, questions were taken from the audience.

Dr. Atwood spoke first and set the tone for the rest of his presentation when he answered the question by saying, “No, there's no scriptural norm for gun control in the Bible. No scriptural norm for a lot of the laws we have that are pretty good; stop at a stop sign, get the dog a rabies vaccination” Atwood prefers to speak of a “scriptural bias” and he justifies this by an appeal to “shalom”, the idea of a “peaceable kingdom”. He speaks of the coming of Jesus Christ into the world and the promise of the coming of the kingdom of God. He quotes from Revelation 11:15 (one of the few times he actually mentions the Bible directly) and speaks of a day, presumably yet future, when there will be “no more suffering, or crying, or grief, or death.”

Atwood prefers that the issue of the Bible and gun control would be blurry rather than crystal clear. He claims that this is so opposing sides can “reason together”, but it seems evident from his presentation that Atwood is very comfortable with a vague Word of God that does not address specific issues of human morality and conduct, especially when his preconceptions conflict with the Word of God. Atwood was quick to point out that his

denomination is not opposed to hunting, or the recreational, sporting, or other “legitimate” uses of firearms; a common refrain of gun control supporters. They are opposed, he says, to the private ownership of handguns and semi-automatic “assault weapons”.

Atwood shares the story of a trip he made to Japan on which he took a shotgun for hunting. The authorities in Japan confiscated his shotgun until he could prove himself worthy of the privilege of possessing it. Atwood applauds the civility of Japan for their commonsense stand on this issue. For some reason it escaped his notice that Japan is a pagan society whose laws are based on pagan morality and a pagan view of the rights of man and the rights of society.

Dr. Bahnsen, in his opening remarks, does two things. First he outlines some of the present legal and academic literature on the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. He quotes extensively from recent academic studies on the matter of the relationship between gun ownership and violence in society. Bahnsen points out that guns are 83% effective when they are used,¹ either by law-abiding citizens to defend themselves, or by criminals to commit a crime. They are, in fact, the most effective means of self-defense, according to studies by criminologist Gary Kleck.²

Having proposed the “pragmatic” reasons against gun control, he then takes us directly to the Word of God as his ultimate authority on this matter. He mentions Exodus 22:2 (Killing a thief found breaking and entering); Judges 15 (the story of Samson killing many Philistines with the jawbone of an ass); Luke 11:21 (“When a strong man armed keeps his palace; his goods are in peace”); Nehemiah 4 (The builders of the wall armed themselves); Luke 22:36 (Where Jesus told His disciples to buy a sword). Bahnsen’s point is that there is an abundance of Scriptures which speak to the issue of self-protection. Rather than being vague and imprecise, God in His word has spoken quite clearly on this subject.

The interrogatory portion of the debate proved to be an interesting exchange. Dr. Atwood asked Dr. Bahnsen about the Reformed understanding of the 6th Commandment. Bahnsen responded by going to the Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 134-136, and pointing out that the Reformed understanding calls for two things; the preservation of innocent life and the punishment of evildoers. The answer to Question 135 reads, in part, “The duties required in the sixth commandment are ... avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defence thereof against violence,” Likewise, Question 136 refers to “necessary defence” as an exception to the rule of the preservation of life at all costs.

Bahnsen expresses a consistently Reformed understanding of the matter of self-defense

1 “Use” means anything from simply showing a firearm to actually shooting someone. Kleck estimates that as many as 2.5 million defensive uses of firearms happen every year, 1.9 million of those involve handguns.

2 Gary Kleck, *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America* (Aldine de Gruyter, 1991) p. 149.

and its relationship to the 6th Commandment. Bahnsen noted that we have abandoned Biblically sanctioned forms of punishment, namely restitution and the death penalty, in favor of more “humane” methods. Restitution and the death penalty have been replaced by extensive incarceration. Consequently, innocent parties are paying twice for the crime, once at the hands of the criminals, and once at the hands of a supposedly benevolent penal system.

Regarding the right of self-protection in this context, R.J. Rushdoony has observed:

[S]ince one form of Biblical restitution was the right of self-defense, the right under certain circumstances to kill the aggressor or thief, the increasing limitation of the right of the injured to protect himself means that we are returning to barbarism without the protection barbarism involved, i.e., freedom to defend oneself.³

Biblical restitution involves self-defense, the right to protect innocent life against the attacks of lawless individuals. It is a return to barbarism when a society by its laws takes away that right of self-defense. Certainly, echoing Rushdoony and Bahnsen, when a society restricts access to the most efficient means of self-defense, it is well on the way to barbarism.

In his series of questions, Bahnsen did a masterful job of exposing the anti-scriptural basis of Dr. Atwood’s premises. In the three questions to his opponent, Bahnsen took the audience back to the original subject of the debate: What is the scriptural norm for state intrusion to regulate the means of individual self-protection? Or, he asked, if there is no scriptural norm, as Atwood has already conceded, what are the bounds that delimit where the state can or cannot intrude? Bahnsen is most disturbed by Atwood’s apparent openness to unbridled state intrusion in the life of the individual without scriptural warrant. He read from a sermon delivered by Atwood in which Atwood states, “If anything good is to happen it must be a political solution.” Bahnsen responded by identifying the ultimate need for spiritual revival in the hearts of sinners, and answers the call for a political solution by saying, “If we have a political solution to just any problem that may come about I’m afraid that the state has become a messiah—a monster messiah—a huge, overgrown, bloated bureaucracy that does things God doesn’t intend for it to do, and doesn’t do them very well.” Atwood seemed quite content to entertain the idea of a benevolent federal bureaucracy looking out for our good by taking away our guns ... at least some of our guns.

Bahnsen drives home this point by asking whether Dr. Atwood wishes to limit access to all means of violence, or just guns? Dr. Atwood expressed no interest in keeping “scissors and knives” out of the hands of citizens. Atwood would “permit” access to inefficient means of violence, he simply doesn’t like nasty baby-killers like “Street Sweepers and Uzis.”

3 R.J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973)* p. 276.

Finally, Dr. Bahnsen asks, “Since you have endorsed state intrusion to regulate the conduct of citizens when that conduct might cause death, do you utterly oppose the alleged civil right of abortion?” Atwood protested that this was a debate about gun control, not abortion, and continued by refusing to answer the question directly, only making note of the fact that he personally opposes abortion as a means of birth control, while allowing it in the cases of rape, incest, and to save the life of the mother. He failed to see the relationship between the state’s alleged right to intrude in the ownership of firearms to protect innocent life, which he is for, and the state's interest in restricting abortion to protect innocent life, which he apparently opposed. In both cases, Dr. Bahnsen identifies the inability of Dr. Atwood to take us to Scripture for a solution.

The debate was an unqualified victory for Greg Bahnsen. He was able to articulate an understanding both of the facts involving gun control, gun violence, and self-defense, as well as a clear summary of the Biblical teaching on the subject. Unlike Dr. Atwood, Bahnsen demonstrated that God has spoken to us in His Word about the matter of self-protection and preservation of human life.

Held in November, 1991, the debate was sponsored by gun owners and Second Amendment supporters. While Dr. Atwood gave permission beforehand for the reproduction and distribution of the debate, he later revoked that permission and threatened legal action if the debate was distributed. Judging from his poor performance, it's no wonder he tried to keep it out of the public domain. The producers of the tape obviously decided to call his legal bluff.

The debate is available in both video and audio formats from Covenant Tape Ministry, 22005 N. Venado Dr., Sun City, AZ 85373. Phone 602-584-3938. CTM can be reached via CompuServe at 70754,1752. [Note: Now [Covenant Media Foundation](http://www.covenantmediafoundation.com), 4425 Jefferson Ave, Suite 108, Texarkana AR 71854-1546, 800-553-3938, International: 501-772-2507, FAX 501-772-3161, email covenant@CMFnow.com.]

One comment on the quality of the video tape. This is not a professional production. The tape begins at some point into the opening remarks by the (unidentified) moderator. There are several minutes of camera instability and refocusing. These are distracting for a time, but eventually the tape settles down. Believe me, the imperfections in quality are worth enduring in order to observe Dr. Atwood’s mannerisms and gesticulations, especially when Dr. Bahnsen springs the abortion question. It is quite apparent that theological liberals can become quite uncomfortable when confronted with their inconsistencies on the matter of limited government and defense of innocent human life regardless of the circumstances.