

Civil Disobedience and Caveats

Christians can be disingenuously selective when applying Peter's "We must obey God rather than man!" (Acts 5:29). Anyone can piously claim they will disobey government edicts that forbid evangelizing or distributing Bibles when the government is nowhere close to making such demands. But what about commands to love their neighbor by seeking justice and correcting oppression (Isaiah 1:19) when obeying such Scripture would conflict with civil authority?

Martin Luther King wrote his famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* to respond to Christian leaders who publicly criticized him for breaking the law by marching without a permit. Among other points, he replied that the authorities broke the law first by violating his First Amendment right to assemble to petition for a redress of grievances when they refused him a permit.

Francis Schaeffer (d. 1984) is widely quoted as having said "Every abortion clinic should have a sign that reads "Open by permission of the local churches." Had Christians refused the fiction that abortion is "the law of the land" and insisted our state legislatures nullify *Roe* as unconstitutional, we would not have over 60 million unborn murders on our account.

I fear their blood cries out to God from the ground:

He who sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God, for God made man in His image (Genesis 9:6).

When God calls the nation to account, I doubt he will give the Church high marks. Salt kept meat from decaying before refrigeration, when Christ said:

You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its flavor, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is good for nothing but to be thrown own and trampled underfoot by men. (Matthew 5:13)

Salt if good, but if it loses its flavor, how shall it be restored? It is fit neither for the land or the dunghill; men throw it away. (Luke 14:35)

Steve Phillips, the Denver, Colorado area cake baker, has suffered a prolonged legal nightmare and financial loss for sticking to his Christian convictions. For years, the Colorado Civil Rights Commission [*sic*] apparatchiks have persecuted him for refusing to use his artistic talents to bake cakes celebrating gay weddings the gender transitioning. But before I chastise Denver area Christians, I ask myself would I have the gumption to organize enough Christians to brave the threats and Fake News if my neighbor's civil rights were similarly trashed? To our shame this case went to the Supreme Court. All this time, Christians who waved their fingers at Phillips for "breaking the law" (I call them "Romans 13 simpletons") proved useless.

Most "Romans 13 simpletons" today profess to admire Martin Luther King, Jr. Would they sing a different tune if they knew he was effective *because* he broke clearly unjust laws? I doubt it would matter - they follow today's political correctness that requires we admire him today. Didn't many of their grandfathers oppose his political incorrectness? In a generation when political correctness applauded wearing sheets and burning crosses in front of people's private homes for their political incorrectness?

Furthermore, Martin Luther King is widely quoted as having said, "In the end, we will not remember the word of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Indeed. The Westminster Larger Catechism cites

“undue silence in a just cause” as one of the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment (WLC 145).

One excuse for nonresistance is the tired old “Christians are only supposed to win individual souls, not get their hands dirty in politics”. They misunderstand the Great Commission:

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations...” (Matthew 28:19 KJV)

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28:19 NKJV)

Which is it? It is both! We are to teach (disciple) God’s way in all areas of life and such witness will draw some to Christ, whom we baptize and teach all that Christ commanded (vv. 19-20).

What will Christians do when a constitutionally rebellious government allies with the more vicious members of the “gay” community to enforce the abominable “Disrespect for Marriage Act” down our throats? And emasculate our First Amendment right to freely exercise our faith?

As Bob Dylan said, “It’s a hard rain’s gonna fall.”

We will need a robust theology of civil disobedience and the gumption, as Tootle the children’s book locomotive learned, to “stay on the rails no matter what.”

During Covid, countless churches surrendered to unconstitutional shutdowns, and timorously submitted to the *political* science behind mask and “vaccine” mandates. Never mind that Covid had a 99% plus recovery rate. Nor did the shot prevent President Biden on down from getting it, and General Colin Powell and others from dying from it.

Moreover, it has wrought crippling side effects, even death, to far too many people.

What about unconstitutional decrees?

Rulers and many others in the public discourse will roll their eyes when we accuse them of violating Scripture. Would that more Christians use a second string in their bows: Civil rulers swore to defend the US and their State Constitutions, often swearing on the Bible.

Here are some points Christians should ponder:

1) Rulers take God's Name in vain when they violate the Oaths they swore to support the US and their State Constitutions, and they add sin to sin when they concluded "...so help me God". Do we support them in their sin when we fail to resist their violations of their Oaths?

2) Christ will say to many, "I never knew you. Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matthew 7:23). Are we not stumbling blocks when we fail to warn them their lawless violation of the law is damnable, vitiating their profession of faith in Christ if they don't repent?

3) Surely God sits in the heavens and laughs at this "homomarrriage" and "gender identity" insanity, and in His own time will speak in His wrath and terrify in His fury if the insanity continues (Psalm 2:4-5). Are we truly in tune with God if we fail to represent God in his ridicule and fury at such foolishness?

4) Our culture today marginalizes Christians who cite only Scripture when they protest unjust laws. How then can we show we're serious about unjust laws if we don't disobey them as representatives of the King of Kings and take the consequences? Otherwise, why should

anyone listen when we say "O wicked man, you shall surely die? (Ezek. 3:18, 33:8)

5) Does compliance with unjust law make us liars when we tell those suffering under them that we love them?

It is clear we need a robust civil disobedience theology.

Some say "We shouldn't have fought the British"

I don't recall anyone 20 years ago saying our Founders should not have resisted the British. But today, they seem to appear from nowhere!

Is this because today you can't be consistent in supporting our Founders' resistance from tyranny unless you're ready to do so today?

Are more Christians citing Rom. 13 against the Founders because they don't want to push back today? No one had to be brave to applaud our Founders 20 years ago and enjoy the benefits that came from their sacrifices.

Consider the Fifth Commandment in light of the tyranny at both federal and state levels:

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you." (Deut. 5:16, emphasis added)

How can it be "well with us" if we dishonor the Founding Fathers by glibly suggesting they should have obeyed the tyrants of their day?

What if God chastises us with wicked rulers?

There is however a second biblical theme to consider: God has in time past raised up wicked rulers to chastise a disobedient people, and He does not change (Malachi 3:6a). Assyria destroyed Israel (Isaiah 10:5-6) and Babylon destroyed Judah (Jeremiah 25:9-10). Nor did God judge only His chosen people, as the writing prophets faithfully told us.

How then can our ministry to the oppressed be complete if we merely encourage them to resist evil rulers without repenting? We must acknowledge both civil disobedience and repentance if we would be workmen who accurately handle the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

If we would advocate civil disobedience, we must revisit Romans 13. It gives *two* reasons to submit to rulers. The first is that God gave them authority (v. 2). The Stuart kings of England used this to justify royal absolutism, tyrannizing their people and expecting compliance.

Immature Christians will obey such tyrants and their apparatchiks,

But *why* God did give rulers authority? It's really simple: Paul explained they are God's ministers (*diaconos*, sometimes translated "servants") *for our good* (Rom. 13:4).

There are three good outcomes that can come from God's servant rulers:

- 1) A peaceful, stable environment conducive to the Gospel's spread. That is why Paul commands us to pray for rulers (1 Tim. 2:1-4);
- 2) The authentication and refinement of our faith through persecution (1 Pet. 1:6-7).
- 3) To chastise a sinful people.

Three times God through Jeremiah calls the cruel ruler Nebuchadnezzar "My servant" (Jeremiah 25:9, 27:6, and 43:10). This man is best known

for serving God by destroying Judah and Jerusalem in 586 BC, leaving them the wasteland depicted in Lamentations.

First “Nebuchadnezzar my servant” passage (Jeremiah 25:9)

This occurs in an oracle Jeremiah delivered in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (v. 1), in 605 BC. This was the year Nebuchadnezzar’s army obliterated the Egyptian army at Carchemish, making Babylon the sole superpower (46:2).

Jeremiah begins his Chapter 25 oracle by reminding Jerusalem of his ministry. For 22 years (18 under Josiah, 4 under Jehoiakim), he had warned her to repent but they hadn’t listened, nor had they listened to many other servants the prophets (25:3-7).

God would therefore send them *another* servant, Nebuchadnezzar, to destroy Judah. But it would be worse. God had promised that Judah, as Abraham’s seed, would be a blessing to the nations (cf. Gen. 12:3). Her disobedience, however, would result in disaster upon more than fifteen surrounding nations as well. They would be “...a horror and a hissing” (Jeremiah 25:18).

Second “Nebuchadnezzar my servant” passage (Jeremiah 27:6)

Early in King Zedekiah’s reign approximately eight years later, five neighboring kings sent delegations to Jerusalem. God had a message for them and Zedekiah: He commanded Jeremiah to publicly wear bonds and yokes on his neck (27:2) as a sign for them to obey “Nebuchadnezzar my servant” as vassal states.

However, a false prophet Hananiah boasted in the next chapter that within two years God would break Nebuchadnezzar’s yoke. As a sign, he publicly broke Jeremiah’s yoke (28:2, 10). With amazing self-control, Jeremiah simply walked away. When God later spoke to him, he told

Hananiah to his face that he would die for inciting rebellion against God. This happened not within two *years* but two *months* (28:1, 17).

But Hananiah's damage was done. Zedekiah and those other kings, incited by his false prophesy, rebelled against God and Nebuchadnezzar. God therefore commanded Jeremiah to replace yokes of wood Hananiah broke with yokes of iron (vv. 13-14). Jeremiah describes the subsequent judgments on these and other nations in Chapters 46-49.

Third "Nebuchadnezzar my servant" passage (Jeremiah 43:10)

This is part of an extended dialog (Jeremiah 42-43) between Jeremiah and the few survivors of Nebuchadnezzar's horrific capture and destruction of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar had set up a governor, Gedaliah (40:7-8), but a rogue militia assassinated him (41:1-2). The survivors, fearing Babylonian retaliation, resolved to go to Egypt despite Jeremiah's warning they will "...become a curse, an object of horror, an imprecation and a reproach" (42:18). When they defied him and dragged him to Egypt with them, he warned them that the very Chaldeans they feared under "Nebuchadnezzar my servant" would invade and destroy both them and Egypt (43:8-13).

What is to stop God from raising up wicked "servants" today to chastise a disobedient people?

As Calvin said: "Those, indeed, who rule for the public good, are true examples and specimens of his beneficence, while those who domineer unjustly and tyrannically are raised up by him to punish the people for their iniquity." (*Institutes*, 4.20.25)

The Scripture agrees:

“I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them” (Isaiah 3:4).

“Woe to Assyria the rod of my anger and the staff in whose hand is my indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of my wrath.” (Isaiah 10:5-6a)

Fathers' sins upon the 3rd and 4th generation

If we are to endure rightly God's chastisement through wicked rulers, we must follow the example of other saints who confessed not only their own sins but their contemporaries' and their fathers' (Ezra 9; Nehemiah 1, 9; Daniel 9). We know that God visits sins to the 3rd and 4th generation for those who hate Him (2nd Commandment). But it happened also to *Israel*. God sent a famine on David's watch because Saul his predecessor had murdered the Gibeonites on *his* watch (2 Sam. 21:1).

The concept first appears in Genesis shortly after the Flood, when Scripture first mentions slavery (Gen. 9:20-27). Noah's son Ham “outed” his father's nakedness to his brothers, and an indignant Noah cursed his grandson Canaan's descendants with slavery. God had already blessed Ham (9:1), so Noah had to curse his son.

We are not told if Ham hated God. We do know he was no outsider to God's Covenant, as one of the eight survivors from the ark.

This first reference to slavery clearly indicates it a certain judgment for sin, at least for Canaan's descendants. For God had blessed man and told him to subdue the earth, each in the sphere allotted to him – commonly called the Dominion Mandate. The slave, by sharp contrast, subdues nothing but is himself subdued by his master. Nor is the master blameless, for he robs from his slave the ability to obey God's command to subdue his surroundings as God's image-bearer.

There is further indication that slavery *can* be a divine judgment. Ezekiel wrote that God, provoked by Israel's disobedience in Egypt, was ready to pour out His fury on Israel but relented lest His Name be profaned among the Gentiles (Ezek. 20:8-9). Putting them into slavery instead, however, did not vitiate His promises to Abraham to give his descendants the Land (Gen. 15:13-14).

Scripture presents a consistent pattern. God raises wicked people to chastise His disobedient people, then judges those very instruments of judgment. Thus God severely punished Jerusalem with both Assyria and Babylon, only to judge them both (Is. 10:5-12, Jeremiah 25:12). If even the foolish King Rehoboam bowed his head and said "The Lord is righteous" when God chastised him under Pharaoh (2 Chron. 12:6), should we not say the same?

So where does civil disobedience fit in?

First, injustice is a mark of living in a fallen world. The Westminster Shorter Catechism 19 teaches: "All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, *and so made liable to all the miseries in this life*, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever." (emphasis added) <https://opc.org/sc.html> If we always have the poor with us (Jn. 12:8), we will always have injustice.

One response to injustice, then, must be to acknowledge that God is righteous and we deserve worse. If God is chastising a nation or a people for sin, they must repent.¹ We need to ponder the sins of our

¹ I believe one of the flaws to the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century was the widespread presumption that only the white racists were wrongdoers – a core tenet of Critical Race Theory.

fathers. Why? To imitate the Pharisees, who boasted that had they would not have joined their compatriots in murdering the prophets had they lived at that time (Matthew 23:29-31)? By no means! Apart from God's grace we would have either joined with our fathers' wickedness or been too cowardly to protest.

We need to ponder the prayers of Ezra 9, Nehemiah 1, and Daniel 9 as examples of men who confessed the sins of their fathers and their contemporaries as if they had committed them. Of course Ezra chastised the sinners (Ezra 10:10-11), but not before he had identified with those who had sinned. This is important, for had Christ not identified with us in our sins, we'd all be lost. If we do not do this, how well do we understand the Gospel?

If God is disciplining us with wicked rulers not primarily because of sin but to grow us in Christ, let us "count it all joy when we have many trials" (James 1:2). Should a community resist injustice, some to the point of civil disobedience? We should at least keep it on the table.

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