



CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND REPENTANCE

Militant Christianity for the 21st Century



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I. Civil Disobedience

Rebellious rulers

With few exceptions, civil rulers rebel against God:

*The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers take counsel together,
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying,
“Let us break Their bonds in pieces
And cast away Their cords from us.” (Psalm 2:2-3 NKJV)*

Christians should not ask *whether* civil authorities will attempt to force us to join in their rebellion, but *when* and *how*. Our fellow citizens buttress their rulers' rebellion by raging and plotting a vain thing (v. 1). We must be prepared to resist both rebellious rulers and those who follow them.

“We must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29)

Don't Christians often observe this passage only when it is convenient? Anyone can claim to disobey a government that forbids evangelism or Bible distribution when neither eventuality is on our immediate horizon. But what about the default command to seek justice and correct oppression (Isaiah 1:19), subsumed under the command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18)? See also Matthew 22:37-40, where our Lord says upon this command and the command to love God hang all the law and the prophets.

Isaiah commanded *all* of us to seek justice and correct oppression, not just rulers. Therefore, God's people *must* resist civil authorities who oppress people. This can entail rebuke, and it may well require civil disobedience.

But many Christians instead will obey man rather than God, piously citing the Romans 13:1-7 command to obey the civil authorities. Then, to justify themselves, they criticize others who obey God rather than man.

This is no small sin. Our Lord warned “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). If we obey God only when it is easy, but obey civil authorities who *forbid* obeying God, are we not idolaters?

Elijah rebuked his generation: “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” (1 Kings 18:21 NKJV) Christ demanded consistent worship. “Be faithful unto death” (Revelation 2:10), even if that meant martyrdom for refusing to burn incense to Caesar as Lord. Either Christ is Lord and we will applaud those who love their unborn neighbor by blocking abortion mills (if we don’t join them!) or Caesar is Lord and we will criticize the blockers as lawbreakers.

On another matter, either Christ is Lord and a church won’t let impenitent homosexuals join it, or He is not, and a church effeminately bows to the gay lobby and wicked rulers.

During Covid, Caesar was often Lord when Christians meekly complied with church lockdowns. This grew worse when Christians did not do their homework and learned that the risk that accompanies gathering together was overridden by the 99% plus recovery rate and, more important, God commanded us to assemble corporately, not on Zoom.

This is no mere academic exercise. Those who head the list of those thrown in the lake of fire are not idolaters, murderers, fornicators, or thieves, but *cowards* (Revelation 21:8)! Ministers especially may well

need to take heed. If obeying the Scriptures will save not only themselves but their hearers (1 Timothy 4:16), what will happen to their hearers if their ministers' sermons lead them astray?

Misunderstanding the Great Commission

One excuse for nonresistance is the tired adage "Christians are only supposed to win individual souls, not get their hands dirty in politics". But what saith the Great Commission? After declaring that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him (Matthew 28:18) – including authority over earthly rulers – our Lord said:

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

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

Which is it? It is both! We are to teach (disciple) God's ways in all areas of life. Some will be drawn to Christ by our example. We then disciple, baptize, and teach them to obey all that Christ commanded (vv. 19-20).

What about unlawful decrees?

The Presbyterians' *Westminster Confession* Chapter XXIII "Of the Civil Magistrate" states that one of our duties towards magistrates is that we "obey their *lawful* commands" (paragraph 4, emphasis added). The *1689 London Baptist Confession* Chapter XXIV Paragraph 3 uses similar language.¹ God created governments as His servant, and delegated to them authority to employ for the *good*, not harm, of those they rule (Romans 13:4). God's default marching orders include "seek justice, correct oppression" (Isaiah 1:19). How then can it be intrinsically sinful to disobey *unlawful* and *unjust* commands?

¹ The English Presbyterians and Baptists were not "Romans 13 simpletons"; they knew better than to yield kneejerk obedience to Stuart tyrants.

Unconstitutional decrees

Moreover, rulers in our Constitutional Republic take oaths to defend the US Constitutions. Whether they recognize God or not, He recognizes their oaths and holds them accountable.

Both *Westminster Confession XXIV* and *1689 London Baptist Confession* have a chapter “*Of Lawful Oaths and Vows*” (Chapters 24 and 23 respectively). God knows what an oath is, even if they don’t, and the 3rd Commandment not to take the Lord’s Name in vain makes it clear He does not appreciate their swearing on a Bible to take an oath they never mean to keep.

How do we honor our heavenly King if we cooperate with rebellious rulers when they break their oaths?

But wait! Doesn’t the U.S. Supreme Court decide what is constitutional and what is not? It does, but what saith the Constitution? Article III makes it plain that *the U.S. Constitution neither authorized the Supreme Court to strike down laws it deems unconstitutional, nor delegated to it the authority to be its final interpreter!*

But wait again! What about the landmark *Marbury v. Madison* of 1803? Didn’t the Supreme Court strike down as unconstitutional a portion of the Federal Judiciary Act of 1789? But what was the Court’s reasoning? It did *not* claim authority to strike down legislation. Instead, it declared that the Constitution itself rendered it “void” because it was “repugnant to the Constitution”. *Marbury* declared that we either have a Constitution that is supreme or we will tolerate laws that depart therefrom. It stated that the law in dispute was unconstitutional *not*

because the Court declared it, but because it violated the Constitution's plain text. For *Marbury* concluded:

Thus, the particular phraseology of the constitution of the United States confirms and strengthens the principle, supposed to be essential to all written constitutions, that a law repugnant to the constitution is void; and that courts, as well as other departments, are bound by that instrument. (emphasis added)

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/marbury-v-madison>

Clearly the Supreme Court did not declare itself free to make up its own Constitutional law at variance from the Constitution.²

Oath of Office violators break covenant with the American people

The Constitution mandates government officials to swear to support it:

The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; (Article VI, Clause 3)

Such oaths are covenants with the American people. The Great Commission commands us to teach our officials that covenants are serious matters. Of God's covenant with Abram (Genesis 15:8-18), Jared T. Parker writes:

God instructed Abram to slaughter three animals and divide them so he could demonstrate the absolute surety of his promises. Evidently, the

² For further reading how this reasoning applies to *Roe v. Wade*, see my "We should have defied *Roe v. Wade* all along" <http://scragged.com/articles/we-should-have-defied-roe-v-wade-all-along>

smoking furnace and burning lamp represented God's presence, analogous to the cloud and pillar of fire that accompanied Israel later (see Exodus 13:21–22). Thus the implication is that the Lord passed between the divided animals and, in effect, swore an oath that he would lose his own life if he did not give Abram and his seed the land for an inheritance.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/gospel-jesus-christ-old-testament/cutting-covenants>

To cite another biblical example, Jeremiah issued a sobering prophesy against covenant breakers of his day:

And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it— the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the¹eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth. (Jeremiah 34:18-20, emphasis added)

When will Christians *stop* failing to resist rulers' covenant breaking, and *stop* supporting them in their sin? Where are the Christians who will fulfill the Great Commission and “teach the nation”?

Here are some further points Christians should ponder as they seek to “teach the nations”:

- 1) Rulers take God's Name in vain when they violate their Oaths, especially when they conclude “...so help me God”.
- 2) Christ will say to many, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you who practice *lawlessness*” (Matthew 7:23, emphasis added). When will

Christians warn their rulers it is lawlessness when they violate their Oaths?

3) Who can deny that God sits in the heavens and laughs at "same-sex marriage" and "gender identity" insanity (Psalm 2:4)? When will Christians join in God's laughter over such foolishness? *Rissus est bellum* – Laughter is war!

4) How do we expect governments *not* to marginalize Christians if we claim to represent the King of Kings but won't take the consequences for disobeying unconstitutional government decrees?

5) Finally, does compliance with unjust, unconstitutional law violate the command to love our neighbor as ourselves and vitiate our Gospel proclamation? To cite but one example: Were the cake baker Jack Phillips' Denver, Colorado Christian neighbors deficient for failing to thwart the Colorado Civil Rights Commission [*sic*] apparatchiks long before the U.S. Supreme Court heard his case? If my neighbor were treated similarly, would I have the stamina to organize a group to defend him until the apparatchiks back down?

Some will say: "Our Founders sinned by fighting the British"

I don't recall anyone 20 years ago accusing our Founders of sinning for resisting the Crown. I am grateful as a lifelong Presbyterian that the British talked of the "Presbyterian War", as an Internet search will easily verify.

Presbyterians who impugn their forebears may for consistency's sake have to revisit the Westminster Assembly of 1643. Parliament called it to revise the Church of England's form of government and liturgy. How then could Parliament legally call the Westminster Assembly even though the King had been the head of the church for over a century ever since the Act of Supremacy of 1534? King Charles I issued a royal

proclamation prohibiting the Westminster Assembly from gathering two days before it was to meet on July 1, 1643, but most defied the King and met anyway.

<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/westminster-assembly>

How can Presbyterians subscribe to the Westminster Assembly's documents if that Assembly defied the King and Head of the Church? Only by holding that Romans 13 did not hold the Assembly to be sinful. Had not the King, by resisting efforts to reform, forfeited his right as Head of the Church to forbid assembling over his head?

Today, our Founders' critics seem to appear from nowhere! Is it because tyranny is so rife today that anyone who would support our Founders' standing up to their tyrants knows he must, to be consistent, resist *our* tyrants?

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."

(Deuteronomy 5:16, emphasis added)

How can it be "well with us" if we dishonor the Founding Fathers by glibly suggesting they should have blindly obeyed the tyrants of their day? Was George Washington *really* a wicked man, defying God when he led his troops to die?

Civil disobedience example 1: Resisting Southern racism

Eight prominent Alabama Christian leaders criticized Martin Luther King, Jr. in print in 1963 while he was imprisoned for assembling without a permit to protest Jim Crow racial injustice. They urged him, among other things, "...to observe the principles of law and order and common sense".

<https://bplonline.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4017coll2/id/746/>

King replied with his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/letter-birmingham-jail>

King's marital unfaithfulness permanently blots his record. That does not, however, invalidate his obedience to the Great Commission when he replied to his eight fellow church leaders. They had admonished him to follow "law and order", while not rebuking the city officials' lawlessness in denying his First Amendment "...*right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances*". They were more lawless than King by supporting the authorities' wickedness. They could not see that the authorities, by disobeying the Constitution they had sworn to uphold, had forfeited their right to expect King to obey them.

The political and sociological landscape has seen massive sea changes since King. Sixty years later, he is universally admired and his racist opponents universally condemned, neither of which costs anything today (as long as the alleged racists are *white!*). Protesting white racists in King's day, of course, invited cross-burning mobs and worse.

But King was effective *because* he broke unjust laws. Today's Christians pay the obligatory lip service to King but criticize their contemporaries who follow his example of civil disobedience.

Final ironies: Many of King's admirers (now that it is safe!) had grandfathers who strongly opposed him. Moreover, how many of today's admirers would have joined with their grandfathers' disdain for him – for breaking the law - had they lived sixty years ago!

Furthermore, 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 classic Presbyterian standard Westminster Larger Catechism cites as one of the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment “undue silence in a just cause” (WLC 145).

Civil disobedience example 2: Resisting abortion

Many quote Francis Schaeffer (d. 1984) as having said “Every abortion clinic should have a sign that reads ‘Open by permission of the local churches.’ ” Christians *should* have refused the fiction that abortion is “the law of the land”, organized themselves in every state, and given their state legislatures no peace until they nullified *Roe v. Wade* as unconstitutional. Why then do we celebrate *Dobbs v. Jackson* as some tremendous victory that took 50 years of what I would call misguided prayer and largely ineffective activism to extract from God?

God required capital punishment for murder because man bears God’s image (Genesis 9:6). How is the unborn child less God’s image bearer than one who is born? Today, the blood of over 60 million murdered unborn babies cries out against us:

You shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it (Numbers 35:33).

God’s amazing patience with us

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 is 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)

Wasn't salt's purpose in those days to keep the meat from rotting? The rot in America today stands as a sharp rebuke to the countless but ineffective Christians dwelling herein.

Any other employer would have fired us decades ago.

The need of the hour: A robust theology of civil disobedience

What will Christians do when a constitutionally rebellious government allies with the more vicious members of the “gay” community to shove the “Disrespect for Marriage Act” down our throats? And threaten to deny our First Amendment right to freely exercise our religion if we have the audacity to claim it? Where are those imitating the five wise virgins and preparing oil in their lamps for the days ahead (Mt. 25:1-13)? Bob Dylan warned sixty years ago in 1962 “It’s a hard rain’s gonna fall.”

During Covid, countless churches effeminately surrendered to unconstitutional shutdowns and put up with the *political* science behind mask and “shot” mandates. Never mind that Covid had a 99.9% plus recovery rate. Never mind that masks block the Covid virus about as effectively as chain link fences block mosquitoes. Never mind that the shot did *not* prevent countless people from President Biden on down from getting it – including Colin Powell who *died* of it!

To add insult to injury, that same shot has wrought crippling side effects, even death, to far too many people, with far too little protest from Christians.

II. God chastises by raising up wicked rulers

Setting the table

There is however an equally important biblical principle we must consider: God Who does not change (Malachi 3:6a) has often used wicked rulers to chastise His disobedient people, then judged His own instruments of judgment. To cite but two examples, both Assyria and Babylon were judged after destroying Israel and Judah respectively (Isaiah 10:5-6 and Jeremiah 25:9-12).

Some will say "That is inapplicable today because Israel and Judah were Old Testament theocracies". True, but these things were written for our instruction and admonition (Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 10:11).

Moreover, God repeatedly judged non-theocratic nations as well (Isaiah 13-24, Jeremiah 46- 51, Ezekiel 26-39). Did not Christ warn His salt of the earth that it was unfit even for the dunghill if it lost its taste, that is, failed to prevent the surrounding culture from rotting? And by good and necessary consequence, how can we escape divine retribution because we, His salt, have failed to preserve the country from putrefaction?

The point is, if we would aid and encourage oppressed people to resist tyrants, are we accurate handlers of the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15) if we fail to bid them search for any sin that has provoked God to raise up the tyrants to discipline them?

Caveat: We must *not* insist that suffering by itself proves God is punishing for wickedness, as did Job's three friends. We should remember God's wrath at those friends (Job 42:7-9). But let us also ponder Elihu, the younger, wiser interlocutor. He tells Job that though the oppressed cry out, God does not hear them. Why? Because they do not consider God and the benefits He gives them even in their

oppressed state (35:9-16). Moreover, Paul warns that God's providence is meant to lead us to repentance (see Romans 2:4).

The benefits for which God gives rulers may not all be pleasant

God indeed gave rulers authority (Romans 13:2). But Romans 13 apologists stop there, without exploring *why* God gave rulers authority and commanded submission to them. "He is God's *servant* [or minister] to you *for good*" (v. 4, emphasis added).

Three good outcomes can come from God's servant rulers:

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

It is this third reason I wish to explore.

John 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)

Does Scripture support this?

The "Nebuchadnezzar my servant" theme

Three times God calls the evil, tyrannical king Nebuchadnezzar "my servant" (Jeremiah 25:9, 27:6, and 43:10). Each time the context predicts this servant will wreak havoc on a disobedient people. He is

the man best known today for “serving” God by wreaking unimaginable suffering on God’s people in 586 BC (cf. Lamentations). Let us look at these passages:

First, under King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 25:9)

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

Jeremiah begins the chapter by reminding Jerusalem that for 22 years he as God’s servant had warned her to repent but they hadn’t listened. Nor had they listened to many other servants the prophets (25:3-7).

Therefore, God would send them *another* servant - “*Nebuchadnezzar my servant*” - to make Judah “...a horror and a hissing” (Jeremiah 25:18).

Second, under King Zedekiah (Jeremiah 27:6)

Approximately eight years later, God commanded Jehoiakim’s successor Zedekiah early in his reign to obey “*Nebuchadnezzar my servant*” by having Jeremiah publicly wear bonds and yokes on his neck (27:2) as a sign.

However, a false prophet (Hananiah) publicly broke Jeremiah’s yoke in the next chapter, claiming that God would break Nebuchadnezzar’s yoke within two years (28:2, 10). With commendable self-control Jeremiah simply walked away. When God spoke to him, however, he told Hananiah to his face that he would die for inciting rebellion against God. This happened not within Hananiah’s boasted two *years* but within two *months* (28:1, 17).

But the damage was done. Hananiah's false prophesy incited Zedekiah to rebel against God and Nebuchadnezzar. God therefore command Jeremiah to replace the broken yokes of wood with yokes of iron (vv. 13-14).

Third, to the remnant who fled to Egypt (Jeremiah 43:10)

This is part of an extended dialogue (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 by going to Egypt and forced him to accompany them, he warned them in Egypt that God would bring that very "*Nebuchadnezzar my servant*" whom they feared, with his army, to invade Egypt and destroy both them and Egypt (43:8-13).

God chastises us through wicked rulers not out of caprice but for our good. To benefit from God's discipline, we must imitate other saints who confessed not only their own sins but also the sins of their contemporaries and their fathers.

God visits sins to the third and fourth generations

The 2nd Commandment teaches us that when a people hates God, He visits their sins upon the third and fourth future generations. But *Israel* faced a similar predicament when God sent a famine on David's watch because his predecessor Saul had murdered the Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:1). But God was merciful. He revealed the famine's reason to David,

who as King dealt with it to God's satisfaction. He then "heeded prayer for the land" (2 Samuel 21:14) instead of fulfilling His stated practice towards pagans of visiting the third and fourth generations for their fathers' sins.

We must confess our fathers' sins

What attitude should we take towards our fathers' sins? Should we like the Pharisees claim that had we lived in their fathers' day we would not have joined in their fathers' wickedness (Matthew 23:29-31)? By no means! Do we dare say that apart from God's grace we would have either joined with our fathers or been too cowardly to protest?

Ezra 9, Nehemiah 1, and Daniel 9 contain prayers that confess fathers' and contemporaries' sins as though those praying them had committed them. This is important, for had Christ not identified with us in our sins, we'd all be lost. If we do not identify with others' sins, how well do we understand the Gospel?

Slavery: Scripture's first visitation of children for father's sins

Shortly after the Flood, Noah's son Ham "outed" his father's nakedness to his brothers (Genesis 9:20-27). Since the text does not explain why what Ham did was so evil, I shall not give my opinion. Suffice it to say that it was serious enough for Noah to curse Ham's son Canaan's descendants with slavery. While Ham was the perpetrator, God had already blessed him (9:1), so the curse devolved upon Noah's grandson.

We typically think of slaves as victims. But how can we ignore that this passage teaches that slavery is *sometimes* a judgment?

Let us be careful here. We don't want to make the same mistake Job's three friends made and invite God's wrath for being His false spokesmen (Job 42:7). But is not the slave severely limited in receiving

God's blessing to Adam and his progeny to fill and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28), reiterated with modifications after the Flood (9:1-3)? Instead, the slave is subdued by his master, who allows the slave to subdue only that which the master allows.

But masters, beware! Immediately after Paul warned slaves that wrongdoers will be paid back for their wrongdoing by an impartial God, he warned masters to treat their slaves justly before their Master in heaven (Colossians 3:25-4:1). What should masters expect when they commit wrongdoing against their slaves?

There is arguably a second example in Scripture of slavery as a 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 (Ezekiel 20:8-9). Instead of wiping them out, God sold them into slavery in Egypt, a fitting judgment that would not vitiate His promise to Jacob's descendants that they would be a blessing to all the nations (Genesis 28:14)? When God's time for vengeance arrived, the Egyptians suffered dreadful plagues, climaxing in the death of their firstborn and their army's drowning in the Sea.

III. Blending repentance with civil disobedience

Let us first remember the obvious: Injustice will always characterize life in a fallen world. If men accuse us of fatalism, they also accuse Christ of the same for saying we always have the poor with us (Jn. 12:8).

Second, Paul commands us to *never* avenge ourselves but await God's wrath (Romans 12:19). Instead, he cites the civil authorities as God's human avenging arm (13:4). It is when the authorities invite judgment

on themselves by praising evil and punishing good (cf. Isaiah 5:20) that we must prayerfully blend repentance with civil disobedience.

May God raise up in this generation a host of Issachar's children like those in King David's day "who understood the times and knew what Israel ought to do" (1 Chronicles 12:32).