

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON
**CIVIL
DISOBEDIENCE**



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CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE



Civil disobedience has been in the news for many decades. It was at the heart of the civil rights movement. It also surfaced on occasion with some environmental activists. Christians protesting abortion have sometimes engaged in civil disobedience at abortion clinics. Currently, there are examples in the news of “sanctuary cities” where government officials proclaim that they will not enforce immigration laws. In an interesting twist, in other “sanctuary cities” government officials state that they will not enforce intrusive gun control laws.

How should we think about this important topic of civil disobedience? What is the history of civil disobedience? Is there a biblical basis for civil disobedience?

History of Civil Disobedience

Civil disobedience has a long history in the United States, starting with the American Revolution. Civil disobedience continued through the nineteenth century (the abolition movement protests preceding the Civil War) and surfaced in the latter part of the twentieth century in the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and the peace movement (including protests against the Vietnam war and protests against nuclear arms). Today environmentalists, animal rights activists, pro-life activists or anti-government protesters sometimes engage in civil disobedience.

The modern debate on civil disobedience has been heavily influenced by the nineteenth-century writer Henry David Thoreau. Beginning from a humanistic perspective, he set forth a case for disobeying government. Thoreau wrote his famous essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" after spending a night in the Concord, Mas-

sachusetts jail in July 1846.¹ He had refused to pay his poll tax as a protest against a government that supported slavery. During the night someone paid the tax and he was released. His essay grew out of his experience and has influenced many who consider similar actions. For example, Mahatma Gandhi printed and distributed Thoreau's essay and always carried a copy with him during his many imprisonments.

Thoreau challenged the prevailing notion of his day that obedience to government was more important than obedience to conscience. Most citizens would have argued that if a conflict existed between moral law and the government, one should obey government. Thoreau insisted that moral principle should come first, and that civil disobedience was required even if it meant refusing to pay taxes or going to jail.

Thoreau's basic principle, however, leaves a question. Who is to decide when to disobey the government? According to

¹ Henry David Thoreau, "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" (n.p., 1849).

Thoreau, each individual should follow his or her innate sense of goodness. Thus, each person must decide what he or she thinks is right and which laws he or she will obey or disobey. This internal moral anarchy resulted because he did not believe in an absolute standard of right and wrong.

Christians, however, have a transcendent set of standards to follow. The Bible lays out clear biblical principles that should be followed when a believer feels a conflict between God and government.

The best articulation of these biblical principles can be found in Samuel Rutherford's essay *Lex Rex*.² Arguing that governmental law was founded on the law of God, he rejected the seventeenth-century idea of the "divine right of kings." The king was not the ultimate authority, God's Law was (hence the title *Lex Rex*, "The law is king"). If the king and the government disobeyed the law, then they were to be disobeyed. Rutherford argued that all men, including the king, were under God's Law and not above it.

² Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex or The Law and the Prince* (n.p., 1644).

According to Rutherford, the civil magistrate was a “fiduciary figure” who held his authority in trust for the people. If that trust was violated, the people had a political basis for resistance. Not surprisingly Lex Rex was banned in England and Scotland and was seen as treasonous and fomenting political rebellion.

Biblical Examples of Civil Disobedience

In Romans 13:1-2 we read that “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.” The Apostle Paul then concludes this section by saying that believers are to render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

The Apostle Peter likewise says, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and

the praise of those who do right" (1 Peter 2:13-14). It is against this backdrop of biblical obedience to civil authorities that we discuss the issue of civil disobedience.

Francis Schaeffer said in the *Christian Manifesto* that if there is never a case in which a Christian would practice civil disobedience, then the state has become Lord. He said, "One either confesses that God is the final authority, or one confesses that Caesar is Lord. The Bible clearly teaches that there are times when a believer must disobey civil law so that he or she can obey God's higher law."³

The Bible provides a number of prominent examples of civil disobedience. When Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all male Hebrew babies, they lied to Pharaoh and did not carry out his command (Exodus 1–2).

The Book of Daniel contains a number of instructive examples. For example, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's

³ Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton: Crossways, 1982), 91.

golden image, they were cast into a fiery furnace (Daniel 3). The commissioners and satraps persuaded King Darius to decree that no one could petition any god or man for thirty days. Daniel nevertheless continued to pray to God three times a day and was cast into the lion's den (Daniel 6).

The most dramatic example of civil disobedience in the New Testament is recorded in Acts 4–5. When Peter and John were commanded not to preach the gospel, their response was, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

These examples each included at least two common elements. First, a direct, specific conflict arose between God's law and man's law. Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill male Hebrew babies. Nebuchadnezzar commanded his subjects to bow before the golden image. King Darius ruled that no one could pray. In the New Testament, the high priest and the Sanhedrin forbade the apostles from proclaiming the gospel.

Second, in choosing to obey God's higher law, believers paid the normal consequence for disobedience. Although several

of them escaped the consequence through supernatural intervention, we know from biblical and secular history of many others who paid for their disobedience with their lives.

Some critics argue that Romans 13:1 clearly prohibits civil disobedience: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." Yet even this passage seems to provide a possible argument for disobeying government that has exceeded its authority. The verses following these speak of the government's role and function. The ruler is to be a "servant of God" and government should reward good and punish evil. Government that fails to do so is outside of God's mandated authority and function.

The apostle Paul called for believers to "be subject" to government, but he did not instruct them to "obey" every command of government. When government commands an unjust or unbiblical injunction, Christians have a higher authority. One can be "subject" to the authority of the state but still refuse to "obey" a specific law that is

contrary to biblical standards.

Biblical Principles for Civil Disobedience

How should Christians engage in civil disobedience? Here are five principles that should guide an individual's decision about civil disobedience.

First, the law or injunction being resisted should clearly be unjust and unbiblical. Christians are not allowed to resist laws merely because they disagree with them. Given our sin nature and our natural tendency toward anarchy, it seems appropriate for Christians to make a strong case for civil disobedience before they act. The burden of proof should be on the person advocating civil disobedience. In a sense, we should be talked into disobedience. If the case is not compelling for civil disobedience, then obedience is required by default.

Second, the means of redress should be exhausted. One of the criteria for a just war is that the recourse to war must be the last resort. Civil disobedience should follow the same rigorous criterion. When all recourse to civil obedience has been exhausted, then and only then can discussion of revolu-

tion begin. Even then minimum resistance should be used if it can achieve a just result. If peaceful means can be used, then force should be avoided. Only when all legal channels for change have been closed or exhausted should civil disobedience be seriously considered. The only exception may be when the injustice is so grave and immediate that time for lengthy appeals is impossible.

Third, Christians must be willing to accept the penalty for breaking the law. The various biblical examples mentioned provide a model for Christian behavior in the midst of civil disobedience. Christians should submit to authority even when disobeying government. Such an attitude distinguishes civil disobedience from anarchy. By accepting the punishment, believers can often provide a powerful testimony to nonbelievers and awaken their concern for the injustice.

Fourth, civil disobedience should be carried out in love and with humility. Disobeying government should not be done with an angry or rebellious spirit. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught that “whom you would

change you must first love.”⁴ Bringing about social change requires love, patience, and humility, not anger and arrogance.

A fifth and more controversial principle is that civil disobedience should be considered only when there is some possibility for success. This is similar to one of the criteria for a just war: that there be some reasonable hope of success. In the case of civil disobedience, success is not an ultimate criterion, but it should be a concern if true social change is to take place. An individual certainly is free to disobey a law for personal reasons, but any attempt to change a law or social situation should enlist the aid and support of others.

Christians should prayerfully evaluate whether the social disruption and potential promotion of lawlessness that may ensue is worth the action of civil disobedience. In most cases, Christians will be more effective by working within the social and political arenas to affect true social change.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, *Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 237.

Additional Resources

Kerby Anderson, *Christian Ethics in Plain Language* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson 2005), chapter twenty-two.

Kerby Anderson, *Christians and Government* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2016), chapter eleven.

Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton: Crossways, 1982).



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