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A Global Movement of Evangelical Presbyterian Churches

PASTORAL LETTER

Civil Disobedience

This pastoral letter sets forth theologically the biblical principles that should be applied to the questions we face as Christians and churches in evaluating and responding to the oral issue of civil disobedience.

The people of God, redeemed by His grace, have always lived their lives in a state of dynamic tension with the world. By “the world,” we mean the sum total of every thought, word, attitude, and action contrary to God’s revealed Word. In this secular society—whose values are indifferent to and often contrary to God’s Word—the Christian earnestly endeavors to follow the “paths of righteousness” for the sake of the Lord’s name. For the most part and especially in nations with a Christian heritage, the Christian can pursue this pilgrimage as a law-abiding citizen, often living a quality of life above the laws of the community as he walks in obedience to God.

There are times, for the sake of his own loyalty to God or for concern for others who are suffering injustice, when the Christian feels compelled to take a public stand against the ways of the world. Often this can be done without breaking a civil law. For instance, a merchant can choose to close his business on the Lord’s Day, a physician can refuse to perform abortions, a public school teacher may in many school districts strongly encourage chastity before marriage rather than sexual experimentation. Christian people can conduct an orderly pro-life demonstration or hold an evangelistic meeting in a public place, if they secure a permit where required.

There are times, however, when the laws of the land permit or command behavior that is clearly contrary to the will of God in Scripture. Injustice, harm to people, and oppression are of such a degrading and evil nature that the Christian as an individual or united with other Christians faces the question of breaking a civil law in order to bring about justice or preserve human life. Sometimes also, laws are directly contrary to the Great Commission. When Soviet Russia’s civil law prohibited the importation of Bibles, Christians for years smuggled them into the country. Some nations have laws against active evangelization. Should a Christian disobey such laws in order to be faithful to Christ’s command?



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The Bible gives us numerous examples of civil disobedience in which God's people sought to do what is right in obedience to God in spite of violating a civil law or decree:

- The Hebrew midwives defy an order by Pharaoh to kill all Hebrew males at birth, covering their action with a half-truth to Pharaoh (Exodus 1:15ff).
- Rahab hides the Israelite spies and refuses to surrender them to the messenger from the king of Jericho (Joshua 2:1ff).
- During several years of David's life, he and his band of followers are fugitives from Saul, the civil authority of Israel (e.g. 1 Samuel 22).
- Daniel and his companions seek and gain permission from an official under King Nebuchadnezzar to set aside an assignment of the king to eat his delicacies and test their health with a simpler diet (Daniel 1).
- Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego later refuse to bow and worship King Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold (Daniel 3).
- Under King Darius, Daniel refuses to obey the decree that prohibited prayer for 30 days to anyone except the king (Daniel 6).
- Likewise, in the book of Esther, Mordecai refuses to kneel and pay honor to Haman, disobeying the command of King Xerxes 2 (Esther 3).

In all of these instances, a supreme loyalty to God that includes His plan for His people prompts them to set aside obedience to a civil law in order to be obedient to the will of God.

Throughout the New Testament, there is a tension between the calling of God's people to be faithful to their Lord and the authority of civil government. During the life of Christ—in which the setting for the most part is in Israel—the supreme civil authority is Rome. The Jews are also under a subordinate authority, the puppet kings of the Herodian family. Ecclesiastical authority under the chief priests is closely related to the Jewish civil authority. Following Pentecost, when the gospel begins to spread beyond Israel, the supreme civil authority remains Rome and the subordinate authorities are the various magistrates of the area in which the apostles and disciples are witnessing and teaching. We observe remarkable consistency both in teaching and in practice the principle of supreme loyalty and obedience to God with a sincere effort to be respectful law-abiding citizens, obedient to civil authority to the limits of conscience.



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The examples of this tension are too numerous to include them all:

- Joseph and Mary are obedient to the decree of Caesar Augustus to journey to Bethlehem for the census.
- The Magi refuse to obey the command of Herod to report to him the exact location of the infant Christ, disobeying because of a warning in a dream (Matthew 2:8-12).
- John the Baptist encourages Roman soldiers to be honest and content in their vocation (Luke 3:14).
- He also denounces the religious leaders (Matthew 3:7) and rebukes Herod Antipas for his immorality.

Christ's teaching and ministry often come into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities (e.g. Matthew 12:1ff):

- He straightforwardly teaches complete obedience to the law of God from the heart (Matthew 5:17ff)
- He acknowledges an individual's responsibility to the authority of Caesar (Matthew 22:15-22).
- He pays the temple tax (Matthew 17:24-27),
- Yet as rightful Lord of the temple, He drives out the corrupt money changers (John 2:12ff; Matthew 21:12-13).
- He counsels His disciples not to use violence at His arrest and submits to the Jewish authorities, even though He has abundant power to overcome them (Matthew 26:52).
- In humble majesty, He stands before Pilate declaring the distinct nature of His spiritual kingdom (John 18:36) and the supremacy of God's authority over that of Roman authority (John 19:11).

Following Pentecost, the apostles refuse to let the Jewish authorities silence their witness of Christ (Acts 5:29). Throughout the book of Acts, the Christian leaders practice law-abiding earthly citizenship as they witness of the kingdom of God and the Gospel of Christ (e.g. Acts 22:25; 25:10-11). Paul and Peter both teach submission to governing authorities (Romans.13:1-7; 1 Peter. 4:12-17). At the same time, there is a victorious witness to the supreme Lordship of Christ (e.g. Philippians. 2:9-11). There also is the frequent teaching



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that allegiance to Christ may involve suffering and death (e.g. 2 Timothy 4:6-8; 1 Peter 4:12-17; Revelation 13:9-10). The weapons of Christian warfare are spiritual, not physical (2 Corinthians 4:10ff.), and the Christian always lives within the assurance of victory in Christ (Romans 8:37; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 2 Corinthians 2:14).

By what biblical principles can a Christian live as he endeavors to live a faithful Christian life in a world whose values and laws often are contrary to the will of God?

1. The Christian's supreme loyalty and devotion is to God.

Matthew 22:37; Acts 4:29; Philippians 2:10-11

He must never compromise loyal obedience to the revealed authority of God's Word. He stands in accord with Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, a diet that included both civil and ecclesiastical authority. When asked to recant, Luther stated, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me, Amen."¹

2. The weapons of Christian ministry are spiritual rather than physical.

2 Corinthians 10:4-5; Ephesians 6:10-18

The Kingdom of God is primarily a spiritual reign of God in the hearts of men and in the church, rather than a political authority. The Christian is, as Chrysostom stated, "a bearer of momentous truth." He is a witness of the gospel, "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes ..." (Romans 1:16). The Christian stands for the right and opposes the wrong by prayer, persuasion, preaching, witnessing, teaching, and doing acts of compassion and mercy, rather than by violence or physical striving.

Paul teaches "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him, he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24-25).



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Writing in *Eternity*, Os Guinness reminds us that we do not ordinarily make headlines through clear persuasive communication of truth, but we do make far more headway than those who use conflict and physical confrontation.² Every Christian should be a prepared and ready apologist for the Christian faith with reverence toward Christ and respect for his hearers (1 Peter 3:15).

3. The Christian's calling is to exemplary citizenship.

Romans 13:17; 1 Peter 2:12-17

The Christian is to be not only obedient and submissive to authority, but he should earnestly aim to do what is right and good, show respect for authority and pray for those in authority in order that Christians may live “peaceful and quiet lives in godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

What then is a Christian’s responsibility when civil laws are bad? Martin Luther King Jr. had one solution: good laws are to be obeyed, but bad laws are to be disobeyed. Consequently, many of his followers in the early 1960s participated in sit-ins at lunch counters, wade-ins at pools, and other challenges to various ordinances that promoted segregation. Likewise, Corrie Ten Boom’s family disobeyed the German occupation law by hiding and protecting Jews.

In a democracy, such as in the United States, the Christian as an individual and in groups should make every effort to change the laws within the democratic process. The people of God are to turn to a sovereign God in earnest prayer for change in their land (2 Chronicles 7:14). Christians ought to courageously bear witness to biblical principles of truth in the matter before them. There is a ring of truth to biblical principles and morals even to a secular society. Christians who are oppressed should endeavor to overcome evil with good.

In spite of all of these efforts, if evil still prevails what then should be done? In an article published in “Christianity Today,” Kenneth Kantzer offers this advice:

It is rarely good for a Christian to disobey even a bad law. That is why the Scripture so frequently urges Christians to obey even evil governments and laws that create trouble for them. Still, there are times when a Christian becomes thoroughly



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convinced that the total welfare of others would be significantly better if he disobeyed rather than obeyed a particular law. When that moment arrives he must obey God rather than man. God has commanded him to be concerned for the well-being of all human beings, and the well-being of human beings demands disobedience to that particular law at that particular time. The Christian in such a case must humbly, yet boldly, and with a prayer to God for forgiveness if he has judged wrongly, disobey the law and be willing to suffer the consequences of his disobedience.³

Such action, if it is necessary, must be as a last resort. It must be preceded by searching the Scripture, much prayer and consulting with the Church. Christians must never operate on the principle that the end justifies the means. We must remember the warning Scripture gives to those who say, “Let us do evil that good may result.” Paul writes, “Their condemnation is deserved.” (Romans 3:8b). Peter also gives us a word of caution: “But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God” (1 Peter 2:20).

Furthermore, Christ warns us about responding in violence, when at the time of His arrest He commanded Peter, “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). Hostile behavior is contrary to the Christian’s calling to love, pray for, and do good to our enemies (Luke 6:27). The militant private militia groups that plan terrorism and kill innocent people are in definite and serious violation of the revealed Word of God. Likewise, those who use overt force to prevent abortions may be sincere in their moral concern, but their radical methods do more harm than good to their cause.

When inalienable rights are unjustly removed, as in the American Revolution, the biblical way is to first seek redress of grievances. As a very last resort, other lawful authorities should form a government to exercise its God-given power to punish the evil doers (Romans 13:4). Some of the recent revolutions in Eastern Europe were of this nature. There was severe corruption, oppression and suppression of religion. The rulers had become tyrants. In *A Christian Manifesto*, Francis Schaeffer writes,



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If there is no final place for civil disobedience, then the government has been put in the place of the Living God, because then you are to obey it even when it tells you in its own way at that time to worship Caesar. And that point is exactly where the early Christians performed their acts of civil disobedience even when it cost them their lives.⁴

How should an individual respond when his rightful liberties are violated? Schaeffer draws three principles from Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex*.

First, he must defend himself by protest (in contemporary society this would most often be legal action); second, he must flee if at all possible; and, third, he may use force, if necessary to defend himself by protest and the employment of constitutional means of redress. Rutherford illustrated this pattern of resistance from the life of David as it is recorded in the Old Testament.⁵

We as Christians living in a democratic society are able to exercise our freedoms as lawabiding citizens. There are many ways within the law to oppose evil and promote what is good. Praying for and working for righteousness within the civil law is the course that Christians should follow. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

In conclusion, the Christian should live his life as the salt of the earth and as a light for Christ in the world. He should "hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9). He should live with the conviction that it is God through the gospel of His Son who changes the hearts and ways of men. He should be a Christian persuader, bearing witness of God's way of life revealed in His Word. He should aim to be at peace with everyone (Romans 1:18). He should pray for the enemies of God and overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). The spiritual power of God through the Christlike lives of Christians bearing witness of His truth is the most powerful influence in a community or nation.

"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (Proverbs 14:34).

¹Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 144.

²*Eternity* 39.1 (November 1988), 79.



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³Kenneth Kantzer “Christians Must Obey the Laws—But Which Ones?” *Christianity Today* 26.13 (August 6, 1982): 10-12.

⁴Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books), 130.

⁵*Ibid.*, 103-104.

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