

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

A pair of scales of justice is centered in the image. The scales are dark and appear to be made of wood or metal. The left pan is higher and contains the word "Right?". The right pan is lower and contains the word "Wrong?". The background is a gradient from light yellow on the left to dark grey on the right.

Right?

Wrong?

Is there ever a time when a Christian is permitted or even obligated by God to disobey the God ordained civil authorities? One would be hard pressed to find an issue within the church over which there is more debate, questions, or controversy. Extremes exist on all sides. Some would say that the Lord has established the governmental authorities and that it is the duty of all Christians to obey their civic leaders, as unto God, without question. Others say that we are to "obey God rather than man" and if our government is going in any direction that is contrary to scripture, we are bound by Holy Writ to disobedience. Within this second extreme, the opinions vary as to how this disobedience is to be manifested -- some say by nothing more than noncompliance; others believe that more militant methods, such as bombing abortion clinics, are called for. The only place of agreement among all these diverse viewpoints is that they all have their own favorite verses that can be called upon to support their particular positions.

But what does the Bible really say about the issue of civil disobedience? Is it proper to form doctrines based on a verse here and a verse there? What is the context surrounding the passages that are normally used to support one view or the other? While not pretending to answer all of the questions that might arise concerning this complex issue, it is our prayer that we be able to shed enough light on the matter, through the light of the Word, that the reader may be able to come to his or her own balanced, biblical conclusions and thus fulfill Paul's admonition to work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12).

Examples of Civil Disobedience in Scripture

Probably the best way to determine the Lord's will concerning civil disobedience is to look at the way His people have approached the matter and how He responded to their actions. We can basically take the examples given to us by God and put them into four categories

1. Can't witness

In Acts 4, we find the Apostles being threatened by the Jewish leaders and their insistence that Peter and John and the others cease from teaching or speaking in the name of Jesus any longer (v. 18). They responded by saying, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." So we can see that when men tell us to do things that are contrary to the Lord's revealed will, we have really no choice but to disobey. This however can be subjective and has been used as a justification to observe all kinds of aberrational practices from withholding medical treatment to children to playing with snakes during worship. The Bible must be the final, objective authority in such matters.

2. Can't worship

Daniel 6 tells the story of how he had found such favor with the king, that the other governors and leaders of the land were jealous and sought to find some reason to accuse him before the king, Darius. As they observed him, they found his integrity to be impeccable. They reasoned that the only way they would be able to charge him would be if it was concerning his faith in God as Daniel was extremely devout.

Their plan was to entice Darius to issue a decree in which no prayers would be allowed to be offered to any god except the king (as he was worshipped as a god) for a period of one month. The penalty would be death. While the king was a willing, albeit unknowing accomplice in their plot, they knew that Daniel would never partake in such a plan.

As was his norm, at the usual time of day, Daniel went to his home, opened his windows toward Jerusalem, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days (v. 10).

While the Lord ultimately delivered Daniel from this trap, the teaching is clear that when men attempt to prevent us from praying and worshipping the Lord, we can see His mandate to disobey.

3. False Worship

The same book of Daniel, chapter 3, offers another example of civil disobedience. Nebuchadnezzar had erected a magnificent golden image. It was decreed that at an appointed time, when the trumpets blew, it was a signal for all the inhabitants of the land to bow down in the direction of the gold image and worship it. Three of the captive Israelites, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, of course could not obey this edict as it was a violation of the first two commandments (Ex. 20:3-6).

When it was reported to the pagan king, he offered them a second chance to obey his decree. Refusal to do so would result in their death by being cast into a furnace of fire. Their classic answer has served as a demonstration of unparalleled faith down through the centuries: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

Again, as with their friend Daniel, the Lord preserved them through their trial, but the teaching to us is clear: If man attempts to force us to practice false worship, our options are clear—don't do it!

4. For the Good of Others

In the 1st chapter of Exodus, Pharaoh had become afraid that the proliferation of the Israelites would threaten the security of his country. As a stopgap, he ordered the Israelite midwives to kill all of the male babies as they were born. Of course this is something that they simply could not do so they told the Pharaoh that the Israelite mothers were giving birth before they could come to assist them and that the matter was out of their hands. They practiced civil disobedience.

During this same time, Jocebed, the wife of a Levite, gave Birth to a baby boy. She hid him for three months. When it became too dangerous to continue to keep him, she put him in a waterproofed basket and placed him in the river where he would be found by Pharaoh's daughter. God's hand was upon Moses, the baby, and he was taken into the king's palace to be raised as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. The Lord even arranged so that Jocebed was to be Moses' nursemaid! However, the fact remains that she disobeyed her civil authorities.

Rahab hid the Israelite spies (Joshua 2) from the leaders of Jericho as the children of Israel were beginning their conquest of the Promised Land. While not attempting to justify her deception towards the soldiers, the fact remains that she, too, rebelled against the government.

The one thing that these latter examples all have in common is that they all were motivated by what was good for others -- irrespective of what cost their actions would have upon themselves. Herein lies the key for us as we look at one more example from the Word of God in our attempt to determine just exactly when is it right to tell the government, "No!"

The example of Esther

That the providence of God is taught in the book of Esther is without question. Esther was a Jewess in the land of Persia who became queen as the result of a beauty contest. Because of the racial prejudice of the Persians, she had been advised to keep her true identity a secret, even from the king. When Haman, an enemy of the Jews, coerced the king into issuing a decree concerning the destruction of the Jews, Mordecai, Esther's uncle, pleaded with her to approach the king and ask for mercy on her behalf. She explained to her uncle that what he was asking was against the law for no one was allowed to approach the king without his first requesting it. After Mordecai reasoned with her, she agreed to do it. Someone might say, "What's the big deal about that? That's not such a great example of civil disobedience." We must realize, though, the vast difference between our culture and theirs for as she told Uncle Mordecai of her Intentions, she explained, "And if I perish, I perish!" Her actions would literally be at the risk of her very life!

As we have looked at all these examples taken from Scripture on the subject of civil disobedience, there is one thing that they all have in common. Peter, John, Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego, the midwives, Jocebed, Rahab, and Esther all did what they did as an act of personal conscience. It was something for which they all realized they were accountable to God and they were in each case acting individually and not attempting to bolster multitudes to their side or attempting to overthrow some institution.

It is not the goal of this article to answer the question of whether the colonists were right to rebel against King George or if it would have been God's will to attempt an assassination on Adolph Hitler or even if chaining oneself to an abortion clinic should have a place within the Church. But rather it is to equip the Christian with the biblical tools needed to answer these questions for himself. It wouldn't be right for us to tell you that it's wrong to practice civil disobedience in front of a abortion clinic for example, nor would it be proper for you to judge another's commitment to Christ if he didn't (Rom. 14:4, 12). It is our prayer that the Lord will truly guide you as you seek His mind and will for your life through His faithful Word.

If you would like additional copies of this tract, they are free of charge simply for writing to the following address:

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