

What Does the Bible Teach About Christians and Civil Disobedience?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

I. CLARIFYING THE QUESTION

- A. Fundamental principles upon which we must agree:
 - 1. Christians are obligated to be law-abiding citizens.
 - 2. Believers living under less than Christian governments will occasionally experience conflict between civil laws and the laws of God.
- B. Romans 13:1-7 teaches that God ordained that there be government over large groups of human beings
 - 1. Christians are to obey the laws even when they don't like them.
 - 2. However, Romans 13 does not forbid lawful means of protest, complaint, due process, and change of leadership. We are permitted to use any legitimate and moral means to change unjust laws.
 - 3. The keys are our attitude, which must be one of submission and respect, not of angry rebellion.
 - 4. And the means by which we attempt to effect a change must be legal by the standards of existing law, and moral by the standards of God's law.
- C. 1Peter 2:13-15 teaches that Christians, citizens of the kingdom of God, must be subject to civil government of the country in which they reside.
 - 1. Martin Luther described our condition as being part of two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.
 - 2. We are citizens of the kingdom of God living as resident aliens in the kingdom of this world. One is spiritual, the other earthly.
 - 3. Much of the time there will be no conflict between those two kingdoms. But sometimes there will be friction and occasionally there will be open conflict. In our day there is an ever growing "gap" between those two kingdoms in areas such as law, public morality, ethics, religion, medicine, education, and the media.
 - 4. How should we as Christians respond?
- D. Acts 5:29 demonstrates that Christians choose to keep the law of God when the laws of humankind create a moral conflict
 - 1. However, this issue is narrower than many Christians believe. We are to submit to civil authority unless it:
 - a. Forbids us to do what God commands us to do
 - b. Commands us to do what God forbids us to do
 - 2. These Bible principles do not address the following:
 - a. Laws that we find personally unpleasant, unfair, or restrictive
 - b. Laws that infringe on previously granted civil rights
 - c. Laws that permit (not mandate) morally repugnant behavior
 - d. Laws that allow the appointment of morally reprehensible leaders
 - 3. As much as we find these things morally vexing, religiously threatening, or harbingers of national decay, they do not fall under the aegis of the Bible texts that authorize Christians to disobey civil law when it requires them to sin
 - 4. The answer to sin against us is not to sin in return - 1Peter 2:22-23

II. WHAT IS WRITTEN ABOUT CIVIL OBEDIENCE?

- A. Ex. 22:28; Prov. 24:21 - How did the righteous keep this instruction?
1. Joseph served Pharaoh protecting Egypt from an impending famine.
 2. David served King Saul protecting his rule over Israel.
 3. Daniel served Nebuchadnezzar with exceptional skill and integrity.
 4. Mordecai and Esther served Xerxes, saving his life.
 5. Nehemiah served Artaxerxes, winning his favor and support.
- B. Matt. 5:41; Rom. 13:1-7; 1Peter 2:13-15 - How did they keep this instruction?
1. Jesus paid taxes to Tiberius Caesar, an immoral reprobate who was using the empire's revenues to violently expand the kingdom, to finance the oppression of the Jews, and to pay for his extravagantly evil tastes.
 - a. Matt. 22:17-21
 - b. He taught that God's children accept and go beyond the Roman law of *aggareuo* ("I compel you") - Matt. 5:38-48
 - c. He healed the officer arresting Him and reprimanded Peter for using violence to defend Him from the temple police
Luke 22:47-51
 2. Paul made his appeal to Nero, the most malignant of all Caesars.
 3. Peter and Paul both wrote these passages at a time when Rome was actively targeting Christians for persecution and death
- C. What did they do about the social, economic, and political atmosphere of their own time?
1. Jesus walked away from crowds attempting to make Him a ruler
 2. John the Baptizer lost his head at the hands of Herod the King
 3. Eleven apostles humbly died as martyrs
 4. Paul wrote Romans 13 when the emperor of Rome from AD 54 to 68 was Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, also known as Nero. In AD 64 the great Roman fire occurred, with Nero himself suspected of arson. In his writings, the Roman senator and historian Tacitus recorded, "To get rid of the report [that he had started the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace" (Annals, XV). Paul wrote his final epistle from the Mamertine Prison and was executed
 5. John was exiled to Patmos
 6. Each of these men was willing to die for a truth profoundly highlighted by Christ - John 18:36
 7. Jesus and His servants used spiritual truth to conquer human hearts, remaining uninvolved with the socio-political structure of their world. They were working tirelessly for something far more important -- the kingdom of God.

III. BIBLE ACCOUNTS OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

- A. Ex. 1:8 - 2:3 - Midwives Shiphrah and Puah disregarded Pharaoh's command to kill all newborn male children of the Hebrews; and, Jochebed and Miriam saved Moses by hiding him in a basket among the reeds of the Nile River.

- B. Joshua 2:1-4 - Rahab directly disobeyed a command from the king of Jericho to produce the Israelite spies who entered the city to get intelligence for battle.
- C. 2Kings 11:1-3 - Jehosheba saved little Joash's life by hiding him from being murdered by Queen Athaliah.
- D. 1Kings 18:3-4 - Obadiah defied King Ahab by hiding and feeding one hundred prophets in two caves.
- E. Dan. 3:1-30 - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego defied Nebuchadnezzar to his face when he ordered them to worship his golden image.
- F. Dan. 6:1-28 - Daniel defied the edict of Darius the Mede when he prayed to God in the sight of his accusers.
- G. Acts 5:28-29 - Peter and apostles defied the high priest and council when ordered not to preach the name of Jesus.
 - 1. Please note that this was a religious tribunal with civil authority
- H. Rev. 13:15 - Christians refused to worship the image of the sea and land beasts and were killed for their refusal.
- I. What lessons can we learn?
 - 1. These exceptions are rare; there are far more accounts of God's children who obeyed civil law than of those who were forced to disobey.
 - 2. The rulers required direct disobedience to the word of God.
 - 3. They illustrate the moral character and respectful conscience of the faithful believers who chose to disobey authority.
- J. Important principles before choosing civil disobedience:
 - 1. Is the government asking me to break God's moral law?
 - 2. Is the government forcing me to choose between them and God?
 - 3. Has my life shown a pattern of Christian character?
 - 4. Have I lived faithfully in every area of citizenship that does not conflict with God's commands?
 - 5. Do I accept the right of authority to execute judgment on me as a consequence for my disobedience?
 - a. "One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law."
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)
 - b. A law-breaker with the highest regard for the law is one who has his heart submitted to the Author of all law.
 - 6. Am I exaggerating the matter by viewing the declining moral environment and the increasingly adversarial social atmosphere as persecution? We are not under persecution. Furthermore, persecution is not a Biblical justification for civil disobedience.

IV. THREE VIEWS OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

- A. The anarchist says that one can choose to disobey the government whenever he chooses and whenever he feels he is personally justified in doing so. This stance has no Biblical support.
- B. The extreme patriot says that a person should always follow and obey his country, no matter what the command. This view does not have Biblical support. Moreover, it is not supported in history.
 - 1. In the Nuremberg trials, the attorneys for Nazi war criminals attempted the defense that their clients were only following the orders of the government, and therefore could not be held responsible for their actions. However, one of the judges dismissed their argument with the simple question: "But gentlemen, is there not a law above our laws?"
- C. The sound Christian upholds the Biblical instruction that he must submit to the civil government at all times, with the exception that the government prohibits obedience to God or mandates disobedience to God. His disobedience is limited to that law and that law alone.
- D. The guidelines for a Christian's civil disobedience can be summed as follows:
 - 1. Christians should resist a government that commands or compels them to engage in evil, and should work nonviolently within the law to change the laws of a government that commands evil.
 - 2. Civil disobedience is permitted when the government's laws or commands are in direct violation of God's laws and commands.
 - 3. If a Christian disobeys an evil government, unless he can flee from the government, he should accept the government's punishment for his actions - Acts 25:11.
 - 4. Christians are certainly permitted to work to install new government leaders within the laws that have been established.
 - 5. Christians are to pray for their leaders and for God to intervene in His time to change any ungodly path that they are pursuing - 1Tim. 2:1-3.

Conclusion:

God puts government in place to enact laws and prevent anarchy. Do we always like these laws? No. Does that mean we get to disobey? No. The Christian must constantly and consistently ask himself that of all the information he hears – from media, friends, or church – how much of it comes from God's Word? Humanity endlessly vents opinions about illness, economy, politics, and freedom, but an authentic believer simply opens the Bible and obeys. Sometimes the issues are complex; thus, we show great charity, praying to discern the best way to apply the principles of God's Word to our service in the church and in daily life. In brief: obey God, honor the authorities, and love one another.