

A Short Theology of Faithful Disobedience

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Pastors and Churches that are thinking about violating a public health order need to study several key issues before making that decision:

1. The theology of faithful disobedience.
2. The constitutional issues arising from or affecting the decision.
3. The effect on the church's witness in the community.
4. The legal issues and liabilities that the church and its leaders may incur.

This advisory is to answer the first of these issues.

Recent events in our nation have raised a question that many of us have not had to deeply consider until now, the question of the Christian's submission to secular government and under what circumstances is it appropriate or mandatory that a Believer disobey the government, and if so, what type or characteristic of disobedience is appropriate. Sociologists and Political Scientists have considered and debated the issue of Civil Disobedience at length. But few modern American Christians have found it necessary to think through the theological version of Civil Disobedience (which we are labeling here, "Faithful Disobedience.") Nevertheless, Christians are citizens of two kingdoms, and need to think through and reconcile their obligations to both.

Scholars recognize an escalating scale of response to civil disagreement, beginning with Protest (the mildest response) and ending with Forcible Resistance (the most severe response.) Conscientious Objection and Civil Disobedience are placed in the middle. These two are sometimes combined (on the theory that they are fraternal twins: one active and the other

¹ This opinion is an advisory from the Executive Presbytery. It is not mandatory that AG ministers and churches agree with this opinion, the Assemblies of God does not dictate a particular stance on this subject. It is understood that self-governing churches are authorized to form their own opinion and make their own decisions on this subject. The Executive Presbytery also hopes that holding an opinion on this subject does not become a cause for division within the Assemblies of God.

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passive.) When they are separated, Conscientious Objection comes first, then Civil Disobedience. In this paper we will consider them twins and call it “Faithful Disobedience.”

The theological question has arisen recently in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments are placing restrictions on a wide range of social activities: businesses, schools, entertainment, travel, etc. Churches are also being restricted. Many Christian leaders have begun to consider the question of whether the government has overreached its authority in restricting the church. Some have already decided the question and are calling for defiance of these orders.

The situation at hand is complicated by several factors:

- scriptural admonitions for and against,
- constitutional arguments,
- legal liability consequences of defiance,
- instances of government’s uneven application of the health restrictions,
- negative media attention and the potential damage to the witness of the church in the community,
- the issue has become a political football in a rancorous political war, and
- suspicion that the pandemic itself is overstated, a hoax, or even a conspiracy to pave the way for “Big Brother.”

Given the smoke and noise surrounding the issue, it is hard to focus on the question, let alone develop a reasoned and redemptive course of action! However, like all complicated matters, it is best to resolve the larger theological issue first, before trying to unravel the unknowns. In this case, that means providing some clarity on a Biblical Theology of Civil Submission or Faithful Disobedience.

Biblical Foundation: The Christian’s Duty to the Government:

There are four primary passages in the New Testament that establish the Christian’s duty. It’s important to quote them in their entirety:

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Mathew 22:21 *"Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."*

Romans 13:1-2 *"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves."*

Titus 3:1-2 *"Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men."*

1 Peter 2:13-19 *"Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully."*

(This 1 Peter passage transitions to the subject of submission to lesser authorities, but it is included here because it contains some related instructions about the purpose and attitude of the Believer.)

A quick review of these passages determines some key points:

God has established a role for secular government in this world. This is an important point—much of Islam teaches that non-religious governments are illegitimate, that there should be no distinction between government and religion. Many Christians seem to lean in this direction as well, advocating that Christians should take over the job of governing society. However, this is not a New Testament theology or practice. While we may rejoice when a Christian is chosen to

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serve in a governing role, we should be careful to avoid the idea that secular government is illegitimate.

Resisting government is resisting God. Before we jump to the question of when disobedience is appropriate, we need to acknowledge the foundational idea that resisting government is resisting God. This point is plainly made, *“whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God,”* and *“this is the will of God.”* When we finally do get to the question of appropriate disobedience, we need to consider that question in the light of this truth, remembering that dismissing this obligation too quickly will result in bringing judgment on ourselves. This ought to measure our decisions.

Submission to the state and interaction with the state is a component of the Church’s witness to the world. We see this in the phrases regarding, *“showing all humility to all men”* and *“silencing the ignorance of foolish men.”* The church has a mission to bear witness to the state. Jesus issued a Great Commission wherein he said, *“make disciples of all nations.”* The nuance here is that the target is not merely *“all individuals”* but, in some respects, *“to all governments.”* Peter’s words remind us that our behavior toward the state *“shows”* our witness. We are reminded that the efficacy of a Priest relies on being *“one of the people,”* (Hebrews 4:15, 5:1) and insistence that the church is *“not one of the people”* diminishes its witness.

Freedom does not need to be exercised. The Christian is aware that God is supreme, that human leaders have limitations, that human leaders are accountable to God, and so, when humans government contradicts God or seems to disqualify themselves, the Christian *“might”* consider themselves free to disobey. However, this is a freedom, like all others, can be abused. Peter advises that freedom does not need to be exercised, that one can willingly submit, and even endure hardship and injustice for the sake of testimony. Further, he warns that using this freedom for selfish purposes exposes a false motive which invalidates the freedom, corrupts the action, undermines the authority of scripture, and harms the Christian’s testimony.

Biblical Factors Justifying Disobedience.

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The scriptures also contain examples of faithful disobedience. The following examples illustrate instances where obedience to God or a moral belief required disobedience of a civil authority. (They don't include instances where the disobedience was motivated for personal or political gain.)

Exodus 1: Shifrah and Puah, the Egyptian midwives, refused to murder the Hebrew babies.

1 Samuel 14: The people resisted Saul in his attempt to impose an unjust death penalty on Jonathan.

Daniel 3: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three Hebrew men, who refused to worship the image, and were consequently thrown into the fiery furnace.

Daniel 6: Daniels' response to Nebuchadnezzar decree that anyone worshipping or praying to another god (other than himself) should be cast into the lion's den.

Esther: Queen Esther disobeyed the King's prohibition about approaching himself, to save the Jewish people from genocide.

Mark 13:9 *"They will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them."* (This passage predicts that a time will come when Christians will be compelled to violate the law, and the Christian's disobedience is a witness to the world.)

Acts 4:19-20 *"But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. 20 "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."*

Acts 5:29 *"But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men."*

(These Acts passages are included here for obvious reasons. However, it must be noted that Peter's statement was not made to Caesar, Herod, or Pilate, but to religious leaders. Furthermore, the issue was not a matter of law but of doctrine. Although this is

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an example of conscientious objection, it is not an example of civil disobedience. It must be noted that the threshold to justify dismissal and disobey a religious leader about a religious restriction would be much lower than to dismiss and disobey a legal leader about a matter of law. Peter might have used more deferential language had he been speaking to a civil authority.)

A quick review of these passages determines certain key points:

Appropriate disobedience is determined by the circumstances. Some of these biblical characters disobeyed their government in a public demonstration while others did so in a private manner. We can envision a scale of responses, from 1) private non-compliance, 2) public protest, 3) public and purposeful disobedience, 4) forceful resistance, and 5) revolution. In this last state, the actor has rejected the government and is working to replace it. It is critical to note that the manner of disobedience is circumstantial and proportional. Not every immoral law or injustice should be answered with the most extreme response.

Faithful disobedience is only appropriate when there is significant moral violation or social harm. The biblical examples above involve infanticide, genocide, unjust death sentence, and forced idolatry. All of these are serious violations involving death or idolatry. These examples tell us that a Christian should not easily dismiss their obligation to submit to the government. Lesser violations do not rise to the level that require disobedience, as evidenced from Jesus' answer to the "tax trap" laid by the Pharisees. *"Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's."*

Faithful disobedience arises out of a violation of conscience. The distinction between a moral objection and conscientious objection is the degree of personal involvement. For example, one may protest a war based on philosophical grounds. That would be a moral objection. But if that person is drafted to fight in that war, they now have a greater degree of personal involvement, to the degree that their participation would be a violation of conscience. This goes beyond a theoretical objection, a mere "loss of rights," or imposition of inconvenience. This person is

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now required to violate their own conscience. The degree and type of objection will engender a different response.

Faithful disobedience requires more than a denial of personal rights or personal gain. All of the individuals in these instances were acting on behalf of others or to their own detriment. None were acting in their own interests.

Faithful disobedience usually presumes a willingness to accept the legal consequences of disobedience. All the individuals in these instances (with the exception of the Egyptian midwives) were willing to accept the punishment for their disobedience. This willingness to accept punishment not only demonstrates the lack of self-serving motive, but it also affirms the allegiance of the individual to the rule of law and to the government. Without this willingness to accept the consequences, disobedience might be ordinary criminal behavior. The motive of the individual and the presence or absence of personal gain can legitimize or delegitimize faithful disobedience. We cannot know for certain the motives of the Egyptian midwives, but it is likely that their lying was not merely to escape punishment, but also because confession would inevitably lead to Pharaoh replacing them with midwives who were willing to kill, and hunting down the babies that escaped. They could not confess.

Faithful disobedience is peaceful. In none of the above instances did any of the actors take up a weapon, or even become angry. The actors did not challenge the governor, they did not shout at the governor, or accuse the governor. We acknowledge that there may arise extreme circumstances where forceful response is justified (as when pastors of churches in the American Colonies supported the Revolutionary War against King George) but there is no good example of this sort of action in the New Testament. The Gospels plainly acknowledge the political tension that existed in Judea at the time of Jesus and the pressure applied to Jesus to lead a forceful revolt. But Jesus, his disciples, and the early church chose not to forcefully revolt against Pilate, the Herods, Felix, or Caesar.

Faithful disobedience has a witness component. The act of faithful disobedience is a testimony to the world. The Mark passage reminds us that that we are to continue to be a witness to the very people who persecute us.

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If we put all of these things together, we can compile a list of factors to consider, in determining whether disobedience is justified and what type of disobedience is appropriate. It is not required that all of these points be satisfied, they are merely questions to consider.

1. The law opposed
 - a. Is the government requiring us to commit an act that will cause injury or harm to another?
 - b. Is the government requiring us to worship a false god?
 - c. Is the government's requirement a violation of a core tenet of the faith?
 - d. Is disobedience necessary to prevent serious violation of my conscience?
2. The response necessary
 - a. Is disobedience necessary to prevent injury, injustice, or violation?
 - b. Have all other means to prevent the injury, injustice, or violation been exhausted?
3. The motivation
 - a. Is my action self-serving or absent personal gain?
 - b. Is my action done with the intention to bring change? ²
 - c. Is my action consistent with my convictions and my conduct?
 - d. Am I willing to accept the consequences for my disobedience?
 - e. Does my deportment manifest the grace and love of Jesus?
4. The action taken
 - a. Is the act of disobedience non-violent in fact and in temperament?
 - b. Does the action positively affect the witness of the church to society?
 - c. Is the act of disobedience proportional and appropriate to the circumstances?

² Secular sociologists generally view **publication** of the disobedience as a requirement to justify disobedience. In their view, intent to bring change is the only justifiable reason to disobey. In Christian circles, the intent to obey God, provides another justification, and so public display may not be as important a factor. But the factor is mentioned here.

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Other Biblical Issues

One prominent (non-AG) pastor published a statement dismissing the Christian's obligation to follow the orders of the governor on a different biblical basis. The basic statement was,

Christ is head of the church, not Caesar. God has appointed civic rulers for a particular purpose and the Christian has a duty to obey them except when they intrude on church matters. The governor's orders prevent the church from being the church, prevents the Christian from performing their scriptural duty, and is an attempt to supersede the role of the church leader. The governor has exceeded his jurisdiction and the duty to obey is dismissed.

While we would all agree that Christ is the head of the church, the three objections are inaccurate and don't rise to the level where faithful disobedience is justified. The governor's order does not violate a core tenet of the Christian faith. The governor has not prohibited worship or gatherings. The governor has only prohibited indoor gatherings. The governor has allowed and encouraged the church to gather outdoors with distancing or masks.

First, this restriction does not "prevent the church from being the church." The church is not defined by an indoor gathering. It is not defined by a size of gathering. Jesus said in Mathew 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." Jesus said nothing about where these gatherings must take place. Churches around the world meet in unusual places: under trees, in public spaces, in private spaces, in business places, etc. Churches are not required to meet inside church buildings. We suspect that the author has forgotten his ecclesiology.

Second, the restriction does not prevent a Christian from performing their scriptural duty (to worship.) Our theology of worship is built on the words of Jesus in John 4:23 Jesus said to her, "The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.... But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him."."

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The obvious point of this text is that Jesus sets aside the requirement that worship take place in the official temples (Jerusalem or Gerizim.) Worship is “in spirit and in truth.” The physical location of worship is not critical, it is the heart of the worshiper that is critical. It shouldn’t matter whether one is indoors or outdoors. No Christian should feel guilty of great moral disobedience by worshipping the Lord in an outdoor location. We should also remember that Christian worship is not restricted to a gathering, but Believers are asked to live a lifestyle of worship. The governor’s restriction should not require the Christian to violate their conscience, prevent the church from being the church, or prevent the believer from fulfilling a mandate.

Third, the restriction does not supersede the role of the church leader. The author claims “God has not granted civic rulers authority over the doctrine, practice, or polity of the church.” However, the Bible is not clear on what “God has granted” in this area. We suspect that the words, “practice and polity” need to be stricken from the sentence because the church has long acknowledged and accepted that the government has some jurisdiction over its practices and polity. There are many religious practices that are illegal: Polygamy, snake-handling, and withholding medicine from a minor are all illegal. Burning candles in worship is often restricted. The government also has jurisdiction over church facilities—all subject to zoning, building codes, health codes, and other regulations. Furthermore, the government has jurisdiction over aspects of church polity, which are subject to a number federal and state laws. The church’s status as a non-profit corporation is a creature of federal and state laws, the state approves the church’s Articles of Incorporation and provides many other protections and benefits.

Our government provides many benefits to religious organizations: legal recognition, legal protections, exemption from income taxes and property taxes, tax-deductibility for donations, and many more. Recently the government extended the Paycheck Protection Plan to cover church salaries during the COVID crisis. These benefits are all predicated on an expectation that the church will comply with certain laws and requirements. It seems hypocritical to take advantage of the benefits while denying that the state has any jurisdiction over the church.

For these reasons the unqualified declaration, “we must obey God rather than man” is premature and radical. It is premature because the religious leaders had forbidden Peter from preaching Jesus—this is an obviously illegitimate prohibition. While our current governor has

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made no dictate about our doctrine. Furthermore, the issue and the motive of the declaration does not rise to the level that would justify faithful disobedience. It is radical because it is an affronting rejection and declaration of independence. The author does not take care to say, *“We respect government and want to continue to enjoy good relations with our government, but in this one point we must disobey. We are willing to pay whatever fine or consequence our disobedience calls for in order to demonstrate our commitment to the rule of law and our general loyalty to the government.”*

Without this qualification, the declaration seems radical and raises questions about the relationship and recognition of the church going forward. Have they renounced their legal status? Have they forfeited their legal benefits?

The argument also falls short on the issue of motivation. It does not appear that the Pastor’s statement is designed to prevent harm to another, but only to protect themselves. And the effort does not convey a sense of witness to the state, but merely of defiance. We want to caution Christian Leaders from making THIS issue the one on which the church says, “We are no longer a part of this society.” (This matter is discussed in greater detail in a companion advisory paper regarding COVID and Constitutional issues.)

A separate society.

The heart of these arguments relate to the theology of the church being a “separate society.” Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Augustine wrote that Christians are citizens of two kingdoms: The City of God and the City of Man. Balancing these two allegiances has always been precarious. However, it is important to note that Jesus and the early church took specific care to affirm the Believer’s allegiance to the society.

Jesus’s statement, “my kingdom is not of this world” is often misunderstood. Jesus did not say, “I am not subject to your judgment.” Obviously, that would constitute a threat to secular rulers. On the contrary, his statement was not meant to convey opposition but submission. He followed the statement by saying, “If it were, my followers would be fighting.” In essence, he submitted himself to Pilate’s judgment.

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Likewise, many of the New Testament authors took care to counter this premise. The greatest examples of this is the Gospels of Mark and Luke. It is agreed that one of the underlying perspectives of these gospels was to show that Christianity is not inconsistent with good Roman citizenship. Mark presents a Christian faith that was not a danger to Roman society, and the view that one can be a Christian and a Roman, too.

This is important because scripture and history teach us that past persecution of the church was always legitimized on the premise that the Christians were "anti-social," and that their inherent independence was a danger to society. Our understanding of the Book of Revelation is that the future persecution will have a similar premise. In view of this, we find it very disconcerting that so many Christians are rushing to prove the very point that will be used to persecute us.

Finally, we want to remind ourselves that, if this current circumstance is an instance of (or precursor to) genuine persecution and tribulation, we have a responsibility to respond biblically.

"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to you ought to answer to each person." Colossians 4:5

"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." Romans 12:12

"In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." John 16:33

"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets." Luke 6:23