

Civil Disobedience

Grace Pastor's Fellowship (November 2, AD 2020)

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I. OPENING REMARKS

Firstly, I'd like to thank Carl Muller for asking me to speak to the Grace Pastors' Fellowship today on the subject of civil disobedience.

“Civil disobedience refers to a conscientious, public, non-violent act contrary to law.”¹ (There are a variety of related forms).

Indeed, this is a subject of great contemporary relevance, brought about through the Covid-19 pandemic and recent unrest in the United States. Black Lives Matter (and they do by the way, but not in their expression), mass protests, anarchy on the streets of major US cities. And all this during a pandemic where there has likewise been unrest concerning government restrictions, the ordering of masks and the restriction upon meeting in public; felt most acutely by places of worship, with some church's acquiescing in the extreme and others rather in protest.

The intent of this presentation is to consider the wisdom of Historical Theology, so as to gain historic insight so as to assist our own Biblical exegesis and theological formulation, remembering J.I. Packer's helpful words that HT has a “a ministerial vs. a magisterial role.”

¹ <https://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/Resources/Documents/Christians-and-Civil-Disobedience> (p.2).

Before I embark in sketching an historical theological map of Christian history on this subject, allow me to state up front more precisely what I mean by HT. Following Greg Allison, professor at Southern, whose textbook *Historical Theology* I am using in my TBS class of the same, he states: “the study of the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine [and practice] by the church of the past.”²

As we look to the visible church’s past for wisdom, we’ll pass through the major eras of the Church and seek to extrapolate wisdom: Apostolic, Patristic, Mediaeval, Reformation, Post-Reformation and Modern, seeking restraint and focus when this subject naturally touches other related doctrines. I’ve sought to cull examples from the breadth of the visible Church, however, attention will be given to the Baptist/evangelical/reformed traditions.

II. APOSTOLIC (c. AD 30/33–99)

This question was already a living one amongst the Jewish community of the late Second Temple period of Jesus’ day. The Essenes and Zealots would happily have revolted against the Romans, the Sadducees were rather comfortable with them and the Pharisees were as tolerant as they needed to be.

There are three NT verses that are critical to understanding this subject: Mk 12:17; Ro 13; 1 Pet 2.

The first is when Jesus skilfully evaded the taxational trap laid by his opponents and in so doing also set forth a key principle on our subject:

² Allison, *Historical Theology*, 23.

‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ And they marvelled at Him.
(Mk 12:17)

Balancing the Christian’s dual citizenship would be a theme echoed in many latter authors.

Secondly, the apostle Paul, who had no scruples in using his Roman citizenship for the furtherance of the Gospel (c.f. Acts 16:37), and who even died at the hands of Emperor Nero in AD 65, wrote to the Church at the heart of the Roman Empire:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. (Ro 13:1–2)

Paul even went so far as to command believer’s to pray for wicked leaders such as Nero (1 Ti 2:2).

Thirdly, the apostle Peter, writing to the “elect exiles” (1 Pet 1:1)—people whose ultimate home and citizenship was in heaven— wrote:

¹³Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷ Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor. (1 Pet 2:13–17)

As with Paul, Peter saw the authorities as placed by God, to honour them was to honour God.

From the Apostolic period, and Canon of Scripture, these three verses (in my opinion) form a backbone to any conversation on civil disobedience. What is perhaps most striking is their conservatism when you remember that Roman Emperors were anything but epitomes of godly, or even good, governance.

III. PATRISTIC (c. AD 100–500)

The Christian relationship to the government would change in the late Patristic period, but not initially. At the beginning Christianity was still a persecuted minority.

Though persecuted, Christians did not rebel against the Romans (or Persians, etc), as the Jews did in their rebellions of AD 66–70, 115–17 and 132–36. To my knowledge there were no known, or at least significant, Christian civil rebellions or revolts during this period.

To the contrary, Christians were generally obedient to the government and took no interest in its affairs (for reasons of idolatry, violence but also because of their heavenly citizenship). The Apostolic Father Polycarp (d. AD 155; who knew John) said at his trial, “To you indeed I have considered myself accountable; for we have been taught to render fit honour to rulers and authorities appointed by God in so far as it is not injurious to us.”³ Tertullian (d. AD 240) said, “All the powers and dignities of this world are not only alien to,

³ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9.

but enemies of, God; that through them, punishments have been determined against God's servants; through them, too, penalties prepared for the impious are ignored."⁴ Origen (d. AD 253) likewise believed, "We are to despise ingratiating ourselves with kings or any other men, not only if their favour is to be won by murders, licentiousness, or deeds of cruelty, but even if it involves impiety towards God, or any servile expressions of flattery and obsequiousness [deferential]."⁵ As Christianity gained the ascendancy, Augustine (d. AD 430) wrestled with what it meant to be part of two cities in the classic, *The City of God*.

These trends began to change in post-Constantinian Christianity. In fact the change was revolutionary. With the coming of Imperial Christianity came the birth of Christendom, the fusion of Church and State; a reality still lived in many parts of the world today, but felt by all.

Eusebius (d. 339) praised this new reality: Again, the Preserver of the universe orders all heaven and earth, and the kingdom of the stars, in harmony with His Father's will. Even so, our emperor whom He loves guides his earthly subjects to the Only-begotten Logos and Saviour, and so makes them good citizens of His kingdom"⁶

Now to be Christian was to be Roman. To dissent from one was to dissent from the other. This was especially true in the East where the Emperor, as the guardian of the religious good,

⁴ *On Idolatry*, Chapter 18.

⁵ *Against Celsus*, Book 8, Chapter 65.

⁶ Eusebius, *Constantine, the emperor whom Christ loves*.

took on a more central role in the Church. In the West another figure centralized control above the State, the Pope.

IV. MEDEIAVAL (c. AD 500–1500)

In the 7th century Christians began to face a new threat: Islam. Soon many areas that had traditionally been Christian were now under Muslim rule. Christians were now second class citizens. Such a policy was continued centuries later under the Ottoman Turks when they conquered remaining Byzantine lands and pushed into Europe. The *Rum Millet* (Roman Nation) were second class autonomous citizens (ghettoed), yet the Patriarch administered taxations, laws, justice, education, etc, on their behalf and so the role of the Church was strengthened. However, as the Ottoman Empire broke up and the Greeks declared independence in 1821, for example, the Patriarch anathematized the Greek revolutionaries remaining loyal to the Ottomans. The Balkan nationalities, one by one, cast off political and ecclesiastical rule from Constantinople.

In Russia (the Third Rome of Orthodoxy), Church and State followed the Eastern practice of close ties. To support one was to support the other. In the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 the Church suffered greatly and it was not until the trials of WWII that the State allowed it to be partially revived. It was revived further still post-Communism and to today maintains a symbiotic relationship with Putin's nationalistic Russian program reminiscent of centuries past.

In the West the Papacy rose in power to such heights that (following Ambrose) rather than being subservient to the

state, nations bowed to the Papacy (ex. Innocent III, d. 1216). Monarch's also came to believe in the 'divine right of kings.' Nevertheless, this did not stop power politics or religious dissenters from not conforming to the established authorities.

REFORMATION (c. AD 1500–1650)

The Protestant Reformations unleashed radical changes in Europe far beyond the spiritual. Many did not read the Bible as Luther did and the so called "murder-prophets" encouraged socio-economic revolt.

Most famously was Munster, which made the label "Anabaptist" a by-word across Europe. In 1534 radical reformers "prophets" proclaimed a "kingdom of a thousand years" and set up the New Jerusalem in Munster. The short reign was characterized by polygamy, communalism, punishment and theocracy. In 1535 a Catholic-Protestant army recaptured the city. The Anabaptist "king," along with two accomplices, were executed; their bodies publically displayed on the Tower of St. Lambert's Church.

Luther (d. 1546) did not believe the gospel could be enforced and also denied the right to revolt. He responded to the 12 Articles (1525) that stipulated the concerns of the common man with *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*. The outset of the Revolt coincided with a preaching tour of Luther's, during which he observed the carnage being caused by the Revolt. In response he wrote *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*:

For rebellion is not just simple murder; it is like a great fire, which attacks and devastates a whole land. Thus rebellion brings with it a land filled with murder and bloodshed; it makes widows and orphans, and turns everything upside down, like the worst disaster. Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you.⁷

It is estimated that 100,000 people died in the Revolt.

The Augsburg Confession, XVI.4 (1530) stated Lutheran belief, “Christians are necessarily bound to obey their own magistrates and laws save only when commanded to sin; for they ought to obey God rather than men.” Like most magisterial reformers the magistrate was viewed as necessarily advancing Christianity and those, such as the Anabaptists, who forbid Christians to serve in “civil offices” were condemned (they were also condemned because of their optical legacy of Munster).

Like Luther, Calvin (d. 1564) upheld a similar magisterial view of the magistrates role, followed Augustine believing in a “twofold government” (*Institutes* 20.1.1), spoke against fanatics (such as the Anabaptists) (20.1.1), the “general submission due by private individuals” (20.31) yet provided that obedience was due “only insofar as compatible with the word of God.” In 20.32 he said:

⁷ LW 46:50).

But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow.

A typical Protestant approach was emerging, but these were also tumultuous times.

Baptists, living in the unsettled period of the English Reformation and Civil War, and holding a middle ground between the magisterialists and the Anabaptists, were generally submissive to authorities. Yet what of Catholic leaning authorities? How ought one to view these matters during a civil war, especially when eschatology came into play? Large numbers of Baptists, along with other Puritans, fought with Cromwell in the Model Army of the Parliamentarians (this is in fact a major way in which Baptist ideals spread).

Some Baptists, blending eschatological views, became quite radical, such as the case with two elders of the Loughwood Meeting House on the border of Dorset and Somersetshire. William Allen and John Vernon (c. 1650s), disenchanted when Cromwell took up the monarchical title of 'Lord Protector,' felt he had betrayed all they had fought for. The Fifth Monarchy men believed the demise of the monarch would usher in the millennial reign of Christ and thus Cromwell was seen as an impediment. Some were violent and some not, however, John Thurloe's (d. 1668) words express the sentiments of these Baptists: "[That] God would put a

hook into the nostrils of, and destroy him [Cromwell], who is the enemy of God and his people.” (*The Captive*, 1658, John Thurloe).

V. POST-REFORMATION (c. AD 1650–1800)

The story of peaceful Baptist non-compliance with seventeenth-century ecclesiastic impositions is well known (e.g. John Bunyan). The writers of the 1689 Confession, mirrored much of article XXIII in the WCF, yet intentionally did not include article three which spoke of the magistrates role to preserve peace and unity in the church. Rather, it concluded:

Civil magistrates being set up by God for the ends aforesaid; subjection, in all lawful things commanded by them, ought to be yielded by us in the Lord, not only for wrath, but for conscience' sake; and we ought to make supplications and prayers for kings and all that are in authority, that under them we may live a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty.

87 years after the Act of Toleration Baptists were again cast into voicing political opinions, this time on the subject of the American War of Independence. John Wesley (d. 1791) was a firm supported of the Crown. Local Baptist pastor in Bristol, Hugh Evans (d. 1781), took a very different approach. Over 1775–6 he clashed with Wesley in a series of letters under the pen name *Americanus* where he embraced republican ideals

and sided with the colonists; after all, the Crown's persecution of Dissenters was in the not so distant past.⁸

Famously on the subject of the American War, John Ryland Sr. (d. 1792), of Northampton, said to his friend Robert Hall Sr. (d. 1791):

‘Brother Hall, I will tell you what I would do, if I were General Washington.’ ‘Well...what would you do?’ ‘Why brother Hall, if I were general Washington, I would summon all the American officers: they should form a circle around me, and I would address them, and we would offer a libation with our own blood, and I would order one of them to bring a lancet and a punch-bowl; and he should bleed us all, one by one, into this punch-bowl, and I would be the first to bare my arm: and when the punch-bowl was full, and we had all been bled, I would call upon every man to consecrate himself to the work, by dipping his sword into the bowl and entering into a solemn covenant engagement, by oath, one to another, and we would swear by Him that sits upon the throne, and liveth for ever and ever, that we would never sheathe our swords whilst there was an English soldier in arms remaining in America: and that is what I would do, brother Hall.’⁹

But times were changing. The violence brought about by the atheism of the French Revolution soon made talk of liberty sound seditious and in time a conservatism came to replace talk of revolution seeing the horrors caused by France. This message, carried along by the Evangelical Revival is largely

⁸ See: Morris West, “Methodists and Baptists in Eighteenth-Century Bristol,” *Wesley Historical Journal* (1994), 162–3.

⁹ *Rylandiana*, 194.

credited with saving Britain from revolution during the decades that followed. Yet the horrors of social evils such as slavery began to test evangelical consciences (i.e. BMS policy on slavery and political non-intervention).

VI. MODERN (c. AD 1800–Present)

In the 19th century a conservatism tended to prevail, however, this did not prevent social disturbances and attempts at rebellion. One such rebellion was right here in Ontario (or Upper Canada as it was then called). In 1837 William Lyon Mackenzie led a failed rebellion to overthrow the oligarchic rule of the Family Compact in the province. The ardent Anglican and Tory, Mahon Burwell described the Rev. Shook McConnell of the Bayham Baptist Church as “deficient in point of intelligence’ but ‘a very loyal man.” He even excluded four of his members for having rebellious leanings. Despite the widespread loyalism some Baptists did take part in the rebellion including one from the First Yarmouth Baptist church, while most did not as it was a distraction from ‘spiritual objects and pursuits.’¹⁰

If time permitted an exploration of Christian views toward the 19th European revolutions would be warranted but for the sake of geographic and theological breadth I wanted to turn briefly to Catholic lands in the southern hemisphere.

When South American nations declared independence from Spain and Portugal the Roman Catholic Church, which had for centuries been pursuing a course of reactionary self-

¹⁰ Read, 190, and Priestley, 238.

preservation and advancement, it tended to side with States in which the relationship would be mutually beneficial. (Indeed the Catholic Church was later criticized for their closeness to figures ranging from Franco, Mussolini and Hitler). As a result the Papacy did not recognize these new states for decades because they broke with Spain and Portugal. An historic divide, dating back to the conquest, between Bishops who supported the State and priests who sympathized with the people may be said to be a seedbed of Latin liberation theology, where Jesus is seen as “revolutionary Jesus” and the atonement one of casting off oppressors. Today, Catholics lean heavily on natural law for substantiating whether laws are just (and therefore authoritative), but nevertheless call the faithful to respect good government.¹¹

If time permitted this question could also be explored as it related to the issue of slavery and the American Civil War.

However, perhaps the most famous two examples of civil disobedience of the modern period come from of the twenty-first century.

Bonhoeffer (d. 1945) was a member of the Confessing Church, an anti-Nazis group of German Lutherans linked with the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth. He is best known for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler. In *The Church and the Jewish Question* (1933) Bonhoeffer articulated three ways Christians might relate to state injustice. “The third possibility,” he said, “is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself.” (See

¹¹ *Catholic Catechism*, 1897–1904.

also *Letters and Papers from Prison [1951]*). Throughout the war he was part of a German resistance movement until he was arrested on April 5, 1943. Following a failed attempt against Hitler on July 20, 1944, with which he was proven linked, he was executed.¹²

During the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s in the USA, Baptist preacher Martin Luther King Jr. (d. 1968) became the figurehead of a non-violent protest inspired, not by Jesus, but the example of Ghandi. Two popular quotes demonstrate his view of non-violent protest: a) “one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws,” and b) “We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence.” While his views on protest did much to inspire the violent protests of others, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Today the USA has a national holiday in his honour.

Much more could be said, of Christians during the era of de-colonialization; Christian minorities in authoritarian or Islamic states; the rise of secularism; Post-Christendom, however, some of the major contours have been adequately sketched.

However, through the Civil Rights Movement, Apartheid and the end of Communism, civil disobedience has gained a respectability amongst many Christians. Increasing de-institutionalization, libertarianism, radical rights, etc, may be conditioning Westerners, and the world, to the legitimacy of

¹² Another story from WWII could be told of non-German resistance in the Netherlands where a Baptist pastor, who as a minister had travel papers, was a member of the Dutch resistance and smuggled bullets and papers, often in his [unknowing] wife’s purse. He eventually joined the Canadian Army as it liberated the Low Countries.

such practices. We live in an evolving world where just like past Christians, we too can be products of our environments.

VII. CLOSING REMARKS

The ministerial wisdom gained from HT on this subject is by no means homogenous; one can discern interaction with related doctrines along with many trends and contextual factors that have been operative, namely idolatry and non-violence; Christendom and modern ideas of liberty, as well as eschatology, ethics and hermeneutics. Usually there has been a reticence on the part of Christians to be civilly disobedient, except concerning God's laws, and the need for reasonable cause to justify any exceptions, or at the very least extenuating circumstances which 'permitted' Christians to rationalize their behaviour.

However, returning to Jesus' words, reinforced and clarified by Paul's and Peter's, there seems to me to be a clear principle to guide us, indeed a rather radical one when one considers who their government was—the Caesars! If the authorities ask of us anything contrary to what God has positively commanded then we are to obey God rather than man. If the authorities ask of us anything that God's word does not condemn, we are to *cheerfully* submit (regardless of our thoughts as to the wisdom of such mandates). Here we must be consistent: if we require children to submit to parents, wives to submit to husbands, employees to employers (i.e. slaves), members to elders (and each other), and members and elders to Christ, we must be consistent in requiring believers to submit to the authorities in matters that do not directly

contravene God's Law. This is a *radical* obedience that would certainly discount violent protests and even call us to submit to measures in the name of public health, such as the wearing of masks and the limitation of public gatherings for matters of public health in a pandemic.¹³ If Paul and Peter could submit to Caesar then we can submit to people like Justin Trudeau.

If we disagree with the wisdom inherent in an authority's policy, let us appeal to them using peaceful and just and rationale means. I was able to do this with our county's CMO and MPP, and to great advantage.

Peter reminds us of the Gospel rationale in such a position:

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Pet 2:13)

After all, there is probably coming a day when we *will* need to disobey the civil authorities on matters of gender and sexuality or doctrinal belief, which God's Law does speak very clearly upon; may our civil obedience now on matters indifferent to God's Word, bolster the case for our civil

¹³ Public health is for the love of our fellow man. I think there is an apathy or unfamiliarity shown toward faith communities, however, I don't think we are intentionally being targeted. If the Rogers Centre, synagogues and mosques had privilege over churches, then yes, you could make that argument. Should we vocalize that we are indeed essential and call authorities to account for ensuring there is consistency between places of business and worship, absolutely. Should we stand ready to remind society of the far greater spiritual issues that far outweigh the temporal health risks, most certainly. If we have a reason to meet and a purpose to exist we will, and will find a way to do so as safely as possible. We are commanded to meet and to sing, but I can think of Christians past and present, who under different circumstances have not heeded those commands (i.e. persecution), and I don't think we'd consider them unfaithful. May we look to the Lord to wade our way through these dilemmas.

disobedience when asked to give to Caesar something that rightfully belongs to God. Thank you.