

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

“Obey God rather than man”

Key question

Under what conditions, if any, should a Christian disobey the government?

Key text

Acts 4:19

“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.”

Introduction

1. Christians are commanded by Scripture to obey human government? Rom.13:1-7.
 2. Are there exceptions? Are all governments ordained of God? Is revolution ever justified? Where Christians right in supporting the American Revolution? How about the Viet Nam war? Should Christians protest or block abortion clinics?
 3. There are three basic positions on civil disobedience.
 - a. Radical patriotism – Civil disobedience is never right.
 - b. Biblical submission – Civil disobedience is sometimes right.
 - c. Revolution – Civil disobedience is normative.
- A. Radical Patriotism – Civil disobedience is never right.**
1. There are three arguments used to support this position.
 - a. God has ordained government both good and bad. Rom.13:1
 - b. God commands people to obey governments. Rom.13:1-7; I Pet.3:5-6; Titus 3:1
 - c. Obedience (even to evil governments) is necessary. Paul called Nero “God’s servant” (Rom.13:1,4). Dan.4:32 “the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.” I Pet.2:13 “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men.”
 2. A critique of Radical Patriotism.
 - a. God does not ordain evil through government. Rom.13:4 indicates that Government “is God’s servant to do you good.” Isa.10:1 “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees”
 - b. Obedience to Government is not unqualified. Acts 4:19 “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.” Ex.1 and Dan.3,6 give examples of divinely approved instances of disobedience to civil authorities.
 - c. We need not obey the evils of government. While we are commanded to obey evil leaders we are not commanded to obey them when they ask us to do evil. (Ex.1; Dan.3,6).

B. Biblical Submission – Civil disobedience is sometimes right.

1. There is general agreement that some exceptions to submission to civil government are necessary. Christians disagree as to when and how.
2. View #1 “I must disobey whenever the government promotes unbiblical laws.” Francis Schaeffer held this view. The Law of God is over the king and he and his government is subject to it. Governments that rule contrary to God’s law are tyrannical and must be resisted. This resistance takes the form of protest or in some cases force. Examples might include forbidding the teaching of creationism in schools, aborting children, etc.
3. View #2 “I must disobey only laws that compel me to do evil.”

When to disobey government

View #1 Anti promotion	View #2 Anti compulsion
When it permits evil	When it commands evil
When it promulgates evil laws	When it compels evil actions
When it limits freedom	When it negates freedom
When it is politically oppressive	When it is religiously oppressive

4. Biblical support for Anti compulsion View #2
 - a. The Biblical examples of civil disobedience usually involve:
 1. A command from government to disobey the Word of God.
 2. An act of disobedience to that command.
 3. Divine approval of the refusal to obey.
 - b. Examples
 1. Ex.1:15-21 Refusal to kill innocent babies.
 2. Ex.5-12 Refusal of Pharaoh’s command not to worship God.
 3. I Kings 18:4,13-15 Rescuing prophets who were to be killed by Queen Jezebel. Obadiah “had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves.”
 4. Dan.3 Three Hebrew children refuse to worship an idol.
 5. Dan.6 Daniel in the lions’ den because of refusal to pray to the king and not to God.
 6. Acts 4:18-19 Refusal to stop proclaiming the gospel.
 7. Rev.13:14 Refusal to worship the Antichrist.
 - c. There are two kinds of civil disobedience.

When to disobey government

Revolt	Refusal
Revolt against it violently	Refuse to obey it nonviolently

Fight it	Flee it
Reject its punishment	Accept its punishment
Not supported by Biblical examples	Supported by Biblical examples

5. Challenges to Anti compulsion View #2 by those who advocate violence in saving children from abortion.
 - a. Prov.24:11 “Rescue those who are being taken away to death.”
 - b. Problems
 1. Whereas the Holocaust was mandated by the state, legalized abortion in America is only permitted by the state.
 2. No one would suggest that force be used to prevent people from worshiping idols.

C. Revolution – The Ultimate revolt against Government.

1. One view holds that revolution is sometimes just. (Calvin, T. Jefferson, F. Schaeffer)
 - a. God-given moral rights can be the basis for revolution as Jefferson suggested in the Declaration of Independence.
 - b. Calvin taught that the government served under the umbrella of God’s Law.
2. Others hold that revolution is always unjust.
 - a. God gave the sword to the government to rule, not to the citizens to revolt.
 - b. God exhorts against joining revolutionaries. Prov.24:21 “Fear the Lord and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious.”
 - c. Slavery presents a possible parallel. In the N.T. slaves were encouraged to seek freedom but were never encouraged to use violence to gain freedom.
 - d. Moses was judged for his violent act in Egypt.
 - e. Jesus exhorted against using the sword. Matt.26:51
 - f. Jesus spoke against retaliation. Matt.5:38-39; Rom.12:19

D. How to respond to Oppression.

1. The best way to effect lasting change in an unjust system is by being a spiritual example, not by revolution.
2. Prayer I Tim.2:1-2
3. Work peacefully and legally to change unjust systems.
4. Refuse to obey oppressive commands and be willing to suffer the consequences.
5. Flee from oppressive governments.
6. Endure suffering as the Apostles did under Nero.
7. Some challenges to pacifism.
 - a. In II Chron.23 speaks of a God-appointed revolution against Athaliah.
 - b. Without revolution tyranny reigns.
 - c. Just war arguments can be used for just revolutions.

Note that the above material is based on an outline of the subject in *Christina Ethics - Options and Issues* by Norman L. Geisler. Baker, 1989