

Civil Disobedience

Biblical Examples

In Romans 13:1-7 we read that every person should be in subjection to governing authorities because there is no authority except from God. Those who resist authority have opposed the ordinance of God and will receive condemnation upon themselves. The Apostle Paul then concludes this section by saying that believers are to render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

The Apostle Peter likewise says, Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right (1 Pet. 2:13-14). So it is against this backdrop of biblical obedience to civil authorities that we discuss the issue of civil disobedience.

Francis Schaeffer said in the *Christian Manifesto* that if there is never a case in which a Christian would practice civil disobedience, then the state has become Lord. He said, One either confesses that God is the final authority, or one confesses that Caesar is Lord. The Bible clearly teaches that there are times when a believer must disobey civil law so that he or she can obey God's higher law.

In the Old Testament there are a number of prominent examples of civil disobedience. In Exodus 1 and 2, when Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all male Hebrew babies, they lied to Pharaoh and did not carry out his command.

The book of Daniel has a number of instructive examples. In Daniel 3, for example, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down to the golden image and were cast into the fiery furnace. In Daniel 6 the commissioners and satraps had King Darius make a decree that no one could make a petition to any god or man for thirty days. Daniel nevertheless continued to pray to God three times a day and was cast into the lion's den.

The most dramatic example of civil disobedience in the New Testament can be found in Acts 4 and 5. When Peter and John were commanded not to preach the gospel, their response was, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Notice that in each of these examples there are at least two common elements. First, there was a direct, specific conflict between God's law and man's law. Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill male Hebrew babies. Nebuchadnezzar commanded his subjects to bow before the golden image. King Darius ruled that no one could pray. And, in the New Testament, the High Priest and the Council forbade the apostles from proclaiming the gospel.

Second, in choosing to obey God's higher law, believers paid the normal consequence for disobedience. Although most of those previously cited escaped the consequence through supernatural intervention, we know from biblical and secular history that others paid for their disobedience with their lives.

Operation Rescue

Operation Rescue describes itself as a group of God-fearing people peacefully but physically placing themselves between the killer [the abortionist] and his intended victims [the baby and the mother]. Members of Operation Rescue explain that

to rescue someone is to physically intervene on their behalf when they are in danger. We have an obligation before God to try to rescue these children and these women. We do this in a spirit of repentance for our many years of apathy and lack of action.

The foundational scripture for Operation Rescue is found in Proverbs 24:11-12. These verses read:

Rescue those being led away to death. Hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, But we knew nothing about this, does not He who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not He who guards your life know it?

One brochure produced by Operation Rescue explains these verses by saying,

It is evil to know that children are about to be murdered and just let them die (Matthew 24:45). The abortionist is committing murder. He will not be able to appeal to Romans 13 on the day of judgment, and neither will we if we remain silent and allow this holocaust to continue.

Another very important verse for Operation Rescue is James 4:17. It is frequently cited with any commentary on the previous verses in Proverbs. And it is also used to answer the question of whether it is sin if a person does not engage in a rescue. James 4:17 reads, Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin. Evidently, anyone who does not participate in Operation Rescue is committing sin.

When asked how going to jail can save a baby, members of Operation Rescue respond that it doesn't. But, they say, preventing the mother and baby from entering the killing center saves the baby and the mother.

When asked why they have to get arrested, members of Operation Rescue respond as follows.

There is an immovable moral ground upon which we stand. The murder of innocent people is wrong-absolutely wrong (Proverbs 6:16-17). Therefore, the appropriate response (based on Jesus' example) is to firmly and non-violently resist the evil by placing our bodies between the abortionist and his victims, which we do until we are carried away. This is called intervention. Intervention is a reasonable and proper response to murder. We are not there to get arrested. This is not a protest or a media stunt. We are there to follow God's command to rescue those being led away to death (Proverbs 24:11). We are to obey God's law even when it conflicts with the laws of men (Acts 5:29).

Finally, members of Operation Rescue are often asked why they don't rescue every day. They respond,

We would if we could. We are committing all we can to this task. If more in the Christian community would respond and be willing to be broken and spilled out we could close every abortuary in this city everyday (Mark 14:8).

Critique by Dr. Charles Stanley

As pastor of the First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Dr. Charles Stanley was confronted with the activities of Operation Rescue in his city and thus provided one of the first critiques of the movement. While he is pro-life and agrees that the Supreme Court precedent of *Roe v. Wade* must be changed, he disagrees with the tactics and methodology of Operation Rescue.

In his analysis of the relevant scriptural passages, Dr. Stanley identifies a general biblical principle and the biblical exception. In developing the general biblical principle, he lists three major passages: Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:11-17, and Titus 3:1. He then concludes that these passages clearly teach that a believer has a biblical responsibility to submit to and obey the governing authorities.

The underlying premise on which this general principle is founded is that government is a divinely ordained institution for the maintenance of order, the punishment of evil, and the promotion of good in the world. This premise, according to Dr. Stanley, is supported by the following ideas. First, all authority is from God. Second, governing authorities are God's ministers. Third, observing the law is a positive, public testimony for Christ. Fourth, observing the law is the right thing to do. And finally, observing the law is ordered by God.

Having stated the general principle, Dr. Stanley then articulates the biblical exception. He says, It is right to break the laws when there is a direct, specific conflict between God's law and man's law because God's law is higher. He lists three major examples: Exodus 1 with the Hebrew midwives, Daniel 6 with Daniel and King Darius, and Acts 4 and 5 where Peter and John are commanded not to preach the gospel.

As I noted earlier, each of these examples has two elements in common with the other. First, there was a direct, specific conflict between God's law and man's law. Second, in choosing to obey God's higher law, the law-breakers paid the normal, natural consequences of their disobedience.

Dr. Stanley therefore concludes that a believer has a biblical responsibility to obey God's higher law when there is a direct, specific conflict with man's law. He then goes on to say that the civil disobedience advocated by Operation Rescue does not fit the biblical exception for three reasons.

First, the law being broken has nothing to do with abortion. Those arrested are not being arrested because they are protesting abortion but because they are trespassing. Dr. Stanley says that if anti-God protesters blocked the entrance to First Baptist Church, he would use the same ordinance to have them arrested.

Second, *Roe v. Wade* neither requires abortions nor prohibits them, but makes them permissible with certain restrictions. Third, the women who choose to have abortions are free moral agents responsible before God for their actions, including the exercise of the rights of their innocent, unborn children.

Dr. Stanley adds that if the law required abortions or prohibited the preaching of the gospel, his response would be different. The biblical exception would be met and the battle lines would be drawn.

Additional Critique

In our survey of biblical instances of civil disobedience, we have found that in each situation there was a direct conflict between God's law and man's law. In every situation a command from someone in authority directly conflicted with a biblical command.

In these cases, breaking civil statutes is biblically permitted. But what about instances where there is no direct command that conflicts with Scripture? This is where proponents and opponents of Operation Rescue generally differ.

Proponents argue that because abortion is immoral and unbiblical, we must exercise civil disobedience. Opponents instead say that breaking civil statutes is biblically permissible only when we are forced to choose between God and Caesar.

Ken Myers, editor of the newsletter *Genesis* and former editor of *Eternity* magazine, summarizes the argument this way. He says Christians are permitted before God to disobey those laws that, if obeyed, would involve sin. But laws that can be obeyed without sin should be obeyed.

The fundamental principle is this: Christians are never permitted to disobey a just law in order to minimize the effects of unjust laws. In the case of Operation Rescue, the law being broken is a just law that prohibits trespassing. Rescuers are not being arrested because they are protesting abortion; they are being arrested for trespassing.

When there is a clear contradiction between God and Caesar, we have to obey God. But in other cases, we are to render obedience to civil authority. If we do not, then a state of anarchy would quickly develop in which each person did what was right in his own eyes. Christians must resist our culture's tendency to rebel at the first provocation, especially in light of the numerous scriptural admonitions to obey those in authority. These verses place the burden of proof on those advocating civil disobedience. Ken Myers suggests that rather than being argued out of breaking the law, we should be argued into breaking the law. Those advocating civil disobedience should successfully argue their case for disobeying the law. If they do not or cannot, then we should obey civil authority.

This principle is especially important in light of our sin nature. All of us have some rebellion in us because of our sin nature, and we want to break the law. So a good check on our carnal desires is to ask if breaking a civil law is biblically required. If not, we should give obedience to the law the benefit of the doubt.

Finally, opponents of Operation Rescue have objected to its use of physical force. Proponents believe that physical force (blocking entrances to abortion clinics) should be used to restrain the evil of abortion. But this raises two questions.

First, what are the limits to the use of physical force? If blocking clinics is justified, what about burning them down or blowing them up? Once any form of physical force is justified, how do we define the limits of its use?

Second, if physical force can be justified in fighting abortion what about its use in restraining other evils like idolatry or adultery? Should Christians block the entrances to New Age bookstores or porno shops?

These are important questions that need to be resolved. Although the Bible does permit civil disobedience, proponents of Operation Rescue leave many unanswered questions at a time when their actions should bear the burden of proof.

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