



Church and State

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE



Opening Discussion

Last week we talked about what it looks like when we confuse the two kingdoms. Do you still have any confusion from that conversation?

How can we best keep the two kingdoms in the proper tension?

Is it ever right to disobey earthly authority? What conditions must exist for such disobedience to be God-pleasing?

The Scriptures

The Scriptures' default regarding the governing authorities

Let's first recap what we have learned from the Scriptures thus far:

- ✘ What does Scripture teach regarding the role and duties of human government (based on Exodus 20:12, Matthew 22:15-22, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17, and others)? What does Scripture teach regarding our calling to obey those in authority?

- ✘ Based on this, what should be our default disposition toward those God has placed in authority over us? Is disobedience to be the exception or the rule? Does this mean that the church must acquiesce to the state in every instance?

Obeying God rather than men

Though the Bible clearly teaches the importance of submitting to the authorities God has established, it also clearly teaches that there are times when *disobeying* the authorities is the only God-pleasing route. Jesus had warned His disciples that they would be hated and persecuted by the world (John 15:18-20) and brought before courts and synagogues and governors and kings who would flog them (Matthew 10:17-18).

Soon, this very thing would come to pass, and the apostles rightly identify to whom their ultimate allegiance belongs:

So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” – Acts 4:18-20

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.” – Acts 5:27-29

- ✘ What caused Peter, John, and the other apostles to disobey the Sanhedrin? What reasoning do they give for their noncompliance with the Sanhedrin’s orders?

- ✘ Is Peter saying that obeying God and obeying men are always at odds with one another? If not, what is he saying?

Biblical case studies

The apostles were not the first of God’s people to disobey orders given by the governing authorities:

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. – Exodus 1:15-17

- ✘ Why did Shiphrah and Puah refuse to obey Pharaoh’s orders? Were they right to do so?

The book of Daniel offers up a few examples of civil disobedience as Daniel and the other Judean exiles find themselves under the heathen rule of the Babylonians and Persians.

Daniel resolves not to defile himself with the unclean food of the Babylonian king:

*But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. – Daniel 1:8**

Shadrach, Mesach, and Abednego refuse to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image:

“...be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” – Daniel 3:18†

* See Daniel 1:8-16 for the full narrative. In this case, the chief of the eunuchs grants Daniel’s request, and true disobedience proves unnecessary.

† See Daniel 3:1-30 for the full narrative. Notice Shadrach, Mesach, and Abednego’s willingness to suffer the civil consequences of their disobedience.

Daniel refuses to pray to the Persian king and is thrown into a den of lions:

*When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously... Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. – Daniel 6:10, 16**

- ✘ What do these instances teach us about faithfulness to God when living under the rule of those who do not fear Him?

- ✘ What do these instances have in common with Peter’s declaration that we must obey God rather than men?

- ✘ What good did God work from the disobedience of His people in the book of Daniel?

When confronted with the impending doom of her people, Queen Esther chooses to risk her life by disobeying Persian law by going to King Ahasuerus uninvited:

“All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live... Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” – Esther 4:11, 16

- ✘ How is this an instance of obeying God rather than men?

- ✘ How in this story do we see Persian law contravene the law of God? How do we see it uphold God’s law?

In the New Testament, the Magi serve as an often-overlooked example of civil disobedience:

And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. – Matthew 2:12

- ✘ Why do the Magi refuse Herod’s order to return to him? How do we know this was an “obey God rather than men” situation?

* See Daniel 6:1-24 for the full narrative. Notice how Daniel continues to go about his (now illegal) prayer life, neither rubbing it in the officials’ faces nor hiding it from them.

The above Biblical examples (and others you may think of) demonstrate that civil disobedience is not always wrong or sinful. There are times when it is even necessary for a faithful follower of God.

- ✘ Based upon Scripture, what are the criteria that must be met in order for civil disobedience to be God-pleasing?

Luther and the Reformers

The Lutheran Confessions

The question of civil disobedience was addressed by the Reformers, who did not view themselves as rebels but rather faithful Christians who were urging those in authority to do what was right.

“...Christians are obliged to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin. But when commands of the civil authority cannot be obeyed without sin, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).”- AC XVI, 6-7

Martin Luther’s On Temporal Authority

For his part, Martin Luther had much to say on the matter in his letter to Prince John.

On the one hand, disobedience is to be avoided as much as possible, and when in doubt, obedience is the proper route:

“(The Christian) serves the governing authority not because he needs it but for the sake of others... such service in no way harms him, yet it is of great benefit to the world. If he did not so serve he would be acting not as a Christian but even contrary to love; he would also be setting a bad example to others who in like manner would not submit to authority, even though they were not Christians.”

“What if the subjects do not know whether their prince is in the right or not? Answer: So long as they do not know, and cannot with all possible diligence find out, they may obey him without peril to their souls.”

At the same time, Luther recognized that temporal authority could overreach its God-given scope:

“It is essential for us to know this, for where it is given too wide a scope, intolerable and terrible injury follows; on the other hand, injury is also inevitable where it is restricted too narrowly.”

“Therefore, where the temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God’s government and only misleads souls and destroys them... it is not to have the mastery over faith or the word of God, but over evil works.”

“If your prince or temporal ruler commands you to side with the pope, to believe thus and so, or to get rid of certain books, you should say, ‘It is not fitting that Lucifer should sit at the side of God. Gracious sir, I owe you obedience in body and property; command me within the limits of your authority on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe or to get rid of certain books, I will not obey; for then you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, commanding where you have neither the right nor the authority.’”

“What if a prince is in the wrong? Are his people bound to follow him then too? Answer: No, for it is no one’s duty to do wrong; we must obey God (who desires the right) rather than men [Acts 5:29].”

And yet, Luther says, our disobedience is not to be confrontational or violent:

“Outrage is not to be resisted but endured; yet we should not sanction it, or lift a little finger to conform, or obey.”

“To act here as a Christian, I say, a prince should not go to war against his overlord—king, emperor, or other liege lord—but let him who takes, take. For the governing authority must not be resisted by force, but only by confession of the truth.”

- ✘ Do you find Luther’s and the Reformers’ criteria for justifiable disobedience to be consistent with Scripture?

- ✘ Luther emphasizes that the state should not (and cannot) dictate to its subjects what they ought to believe. How have we seen the state attempting to do this in the past? In our time?

- ✘ Do you agree with Luther’s statement that we “owe (the state) obedience in body and property?” What implications might this have for current controversial topics?

- ✘ When in doubt, Luther tends toward obedience to the governing authorities. How is this a biblical approach? How can this tendency be misunderstood or abused?*

Civil disobedience in American history

In American history, our relationship status with authority can only be described as: “It’s complicated.” Our nation was born out of a revolution which sought to throw off tyrannical rule, its justifications a scrambled cocktail of biblical precepts, Enlightenment thinking, and natural rights philosophy. We have debated the role of authority in our nation ever since.

* Swiss theologian Karl Barth felt that the Lutheran view of the two kingdoms helped pave the way for the Nazi takeover of Germany: “To a certain extent, Lutheranism has provided a breathing space for German paganism, and has allotted it—with its separation of creation and law from the gospel—something like a sacral precinct. It is possible for the German pagan to use the Lutheran doctrine of the authority of the state as a Christian justification for National Socialism, and it is possible for the German Christian to feel himself invited by the same doctrine to a recognition of National Socialism. Both have in fact occurred.” For a thorough treatment of this phenomenon as well as the response of other Lutheran pastors and theologians of the time, see Eric Metaxas’ biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The Declaration of Independence

On July 4, 1776 the Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia, explaining why the thirteen American colonies believed themselves to be independent and no longer subject to British rule. In famous words forever immortalized in US History, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness... to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”

- ✘ What similarities or differences are there between the Declaration’s understanding of the role of government and the Bible’s teaching?

Jefferson continues:

“...That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness...”

“But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security...”

“A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

“...appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions...”

- ✘ According to the Declaration of Independence, what are the criteria that justify rebellion? How do these (or don’t these) correspond to the teaching of the Bible?

The rights the Founding Fathers believed to have been taken away by King George’s tyranny were written into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. But some Americans have felt that even these revered documents have served to enshrine injustice and inequality.*

- ✘ In our American system in which “We the People” *are* the governing authorities, what are some ways to do right when our nation’s laws are contrary to God’s Word?

* On the 200th anniversary of the ratification of the US Constitution, Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American to sit on the Supreme Court, said that the Constitution was "defective from the start." He believed that its conception of “We the People” left out many Americans. While some members of the Constitutional Convention voiced "eloquent objections" to slavery, Marshall said they "consented to a document which laid a foundation for the tragic events which were to follow." These words echo those of abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison who burned a copy of the Constitution in 1854 and called it “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell,” and the more famous objections of Henry David Thoreau who felt that full-scale civil disobedience was justified and demanded by the Constitution’s enshrinement of slavery and that the only moral reaction was to refuse allegiance to the state and the paying of taxes that went along with it.

- ✘ Are our American ideals (with their varying levels of consistency with Scripture) ever conflated with Biblical teaching? How can we guard against mistaking our political opinions with the Word of God? How can we make sure our political opinions are informed and guided by the Word of God?

A few modern case studies

Discuss the following scenarios. In each of these, are the two kingdoms being rightly distinguished or are they being confused? How might a faithful Christian appropriately respond in these situations?

- ✘ A Christian school refuses to follow a state mask mandate. When state officials respond to formal complaints from families and ask the administration why they are refusing to abide by the mandate, the principal replies, "We answer to a higher power."
- ✘ A nation passes a law that makes it illegal to call homosexual behavior a sin. Pastors, counselors, and other professionals who refuse to comply could face up to five years in jail.
- ✘ A local congregation, in its celebration of "Sanctity of Life Sunday," speaks out against the legality of abortion in the nation, claims that all life is sacred and precious in God's eyes, and provides resources for its members to assist those dealing with unplanned pregnancies.
- ✘ A state legislature votes to make Christianity the official state religion, requiring prayer to the Triune God at all civic events and outlawing certain practices of other, non-Christian religions.

Wrapping up

What insights from our conversation today have you gained about civil disobedience?

How has our study so far deepened or altered your understanding of church and state?

What questions do you still have about the two kingdoms?