Obeying and disobeying the civic authorities

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Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.

- Henry David Thoreau



Sir Thomas More (1478 - 1535)
- based on a sketch by Hans Holbein

Recognising God's gift of civic governance

While civic authorities are often unjust, government is conceptually good and is to be received as God's gift. So Jesus affirmed civic authority, saying *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's"* (Mark 12:17), and telling Pilate that power is *given to you from above* (John 19:11). Similarly Paul stated: *there is no authority except that which God has established* (Romans 13:1).

Esteeming civic authority, Paul said to Felix - the Roman governor of Judea: *"I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation, so I gladly make my defence"* (Acts 24:10). Then he told Governor Festus, *"I have done nothing wrong ... against Caesar"* (25:8). Paul also upheld the value of *standing before Caesar's court* - where accused persons *ought to be tried* (25:10), and he politely told King Agrippa II, *"I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defence"* (26:2).

As governance is conceptually Godly, Peter wrote: *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors* (I Peter 2:13-14), and Paul urged Titus (3:1) - *Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities* ....

Recognising that *the authorities that exist have been established by God* (Romans 13:2) his people may assert his rule over the government - neither slavishly obeying the laws nor dismissing them as irrelevant or "of the devil". Instead we should scrutinise civic demands, obey worthy requirements, reform unjust laws, and (if necessary) engage in open or secret civil disobedience.

Scrutinising the requirements of the legal system

Christians have a responsibility to recognise Jesus as Lord, and to analyse carefully the various obligations imposed by government. The Lord's ruling, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's ..."* (Mark 12:17) requires keen scrutiny as to what may be imposed legitimately by the State. Similarly, Jesus asked who should pay tax levied by the temple leaders under the supervision of Rome: *"From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes - from their own sons or from others?* (Matthew 17:25). Though *"the sons are exempt"*, Jesus told Peter to pay the tax, *"so that we may not offend them"* (17:26-27) - as the obligation was worthy (or at least non-objectionable).

Applying that gracious approach, Jesus encouraged obedience to authority: *"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, so you must obey them and do everything they tell you* (Matthew 23:2-3). But this is no call to "blind" or slavish obedience. Rather, it refers to heeding valid rules and regulations set by the interpreters of the law of Moses. So Jesus upheld the rule permitting the rescue of a sheep that *falls into a pit on the Sabbath* (12:11), but rejected the rule that allowed divorce *for any and every reason* (19:3).

Since the Lord's teaching opposes the idea of passive, unthinking or "blind" obedience, Christians should turn away from the commonly-held principle: *While the authority may err in commanding, the servant does not err in obeying.* Instead of blindly obeying (that enables tyranny, ignorance and a failure to take responsibility) reason should ideally undergird obedience, as noted in a saying attributed to the Athenian reformer Solon (638-558 BC) - *Rules are for the guidance of wise men, and the blind obedience of fools*.

This applies even to military personnel. While they are expected to obey, they must also gain understanding, so they can apply orders flexibly in response to rapidly moving situations including loss of communication with superiors.

Affirming and obeying worthy or non-objectionable requirements

When civic demands are less than ideal, but non-objectionable, we can obey them in accord with the instruction: *Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone* (Romans 12:17-18). And when the civic requirements are worthy, God's people may obey and commend these as valid duties. So Paul stated: *Give everyone what you owe him. If you owe taxes, pay taxes, if revenue, then revenue, if respect, then respect, if honour, then honour* (13:7).

Appealing unjust civic rulings

If God's people do not accept a civic demand, they should pray for wisdom and (wherever possible) should submissively, respectfully and forthrightly appeal the requirement, and seek its reform - as in the following biblical examples:

The Israelite foremen raised concern in response to oppression in Egypt as they *appealed to Pharaoh* and told him, *"Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people"* (Exodus 5:16).

Queen Esther responded to the unjust law of the Persian Empire which threatened the lives of all the Jews. Having learned about this crisis, Esther (4:15) urged the people of God to fast (and presumably pray). Risking death by entering the presence of King Xerxes without invitation (4:16), Esther *pleaded with the king, falling at his feet* (8:3). She earnestly petitioned him to pass another law (8:5) giving freedom to all God's people in the empire.

The king was so pleased with Esther that he upheld her appeal for the good of the Jews (and for the empire, which could not prosper by killing the innocent). The resultant reversal of government policy exemplified a wisdom principle: *Through patience a ruler can be persuaded* (Proverbs 25:15).

The Apostle Paul exposed the unjust intent of Governor Festus, and stated: *"... if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no-one has the right to hand me over"* - so Paul appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11).

Responding when appeals do not succeed

God's people in the modern democracies can use various opportunities to appeal and reform unjust laws - generally without fear. But if such responses are not permitted by the State, or if the appeal is unsuccessful, God's people may determine to quietly and secretly ignore such obligations, or openly and publicly disobey the civic leaders who have exceeded their legitimate authority.

The consequent State prosecution and persecution may be borne most nobly as *it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God* (I Peter 2:19).

The peaceful refusal to cooperate with the unjust demands set by the civic leaders is called *civil disobedience.* Illegitimate demands may be disobeyed *openly* - if opposition should be voiced publicly as a witness or testimony, or *secretly* - if nothing is to be gained by making the matter open and public.

Secretly disobeying unacceptable civic obligations

In response to unjust civic demand, a secret refusal to obey can be necessary - if no direct confrontation is needed or useful. So the **Hebrew midwives** spoke shrewdly to Pharaoh, after quietly refusing to kill the newborn Hebrew boys (Exodus 1:15-19); **Moses' mother** secretly hid her newborn son (1:22, 2:2); **Rahab** engaged in surreptitious civil disobedience, giving the Israelite spies protection inside the city of Jericho and delivering them from harm (Joshua 2); **Daniel** (6:6-12) privately prayed - illegally; **the Magi** furtively disregarded King Herod's false request to know where to find Christ (Matthew 2:1-12); **Mary** and **Joseph** fled with the infant Jesus, escaping Herod's men (2:13-16); and in Syria **Paul** escaped persecution (II Corinthians 11:32-33):

> *... In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.*

Openly defying unjust civic demands

If unjust civic requirements are to be confronted, open disobedience may be warranted as a public testimony. So **Moses** boldly told Pharaoh repeatedly: *"Let my people go"* (Exodus 5-14); the guards of King Saul refused his order to kill God's ministers (I Samuel 22:17); **Mordecai** refused to honour Haman (Esther 3:2; 5:9); and **Shadrach**, **Meshach** and **Abednego** would not worship the king's statue (Daniel 3:18). Our Lord **Jesus** cleared the Court of the Gentiles (Mark 11:15) and refused to answer the high priest Caiaphas (14:61), Pilate (15:5), and Herod the Tetrach (Luke 23:9) - whom he called *"that fox"* (13:32). Contrary to Leviticus 5:2, Jesus touched a leper to give him healing (Matthew 8:3), though he could heal by a simple word of command (8:8). Then **Peter** and **John** famously rebuked the Jewish leaders (Acts 4:19, 5:29): *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God" .... "We must obey God rather than men".*

Among civic leaders who openly disobeyed government, **Sir Thomas More** is noteworthy. A former Lord Chancellor of England, he refused to endorse the plans of King Henry VIII to divorce his Queen Catherine of Aragon. Calling himself, *The king's good servant, but God's servant first*, More was killed for obeying the Lord's word: *"Give ... to God what is God's"* (Mark 12:17).

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