

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Romans 13:1-10

INTRODUCTION

- For our anabaptist forefathers, merely rejecting infant baptism in favour of believer's baptism amounted to an act of civil disobedience, which brought upon them the fierce wrath of both Catholic and Protestant governments
- Since the fall of man, and the instituting of human government, there has been a continual tension for God's saints between submission to these authorities, and disobeying them when necessary
- Christians in communist or Muslim countries have had to work through these issues for a long time, but in the West, it is only in more recent years as our governments become increasingly antichrist and hostile to the church that Christians have been forced to ask the question, "At what point does God require me to disobey the government?"
- There are a number of ways that we can err in understanding our relationship to governing authorities
 - ✓ The anarchist – disobey government at any time
 - ✓ The loyalist patriot – since government is ordained by God, it must be obeyed absolutely in all things, without question
 - ✓ The militant theonomist – anything short of a Christian government based on God's law is illegitimate, does not require our obedience in anything, and should be overthrown by Christians, by force if necessary
- The moment we are saved, we become citizens of God's heavenly kingdom
- Yet, this does not mean we cease to be citizens of the earthly nation we dwell in
- It means that our heavenly citizenship takes precedence over our earthly
- We are to be the best possible citizens in our society and nation, model citizens in subjection to God-ordained rulers
- But there will be times we must disobey man in order to obey God
- Civil disobedience is defined as non-compliance of a citizen to the rule, law, or mandate of the civil government, whether that government be local, regional, or national
- In this sermon we will consider how God has established human government, the specific purpose they are to fulfil, and the circumstances in which we must disobey them

I. THE DOMAIN OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT

- A. God exercises his authority over man through human mediators
 1. God's rule is over all his creation, both in heaven and on earth (Psalm 103:19; Matthew 28:18; 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16)
 2. Our duty as God's creatures is to submit to his rule over us
 3. That rule is expressed by means of various human authorities

4. We should not view God's rule and man's rule as separated circles of authority, but rather see God's rule as the greater circle, with man's rule as a circle within the greater
 5. These human authorities operate within the limits of the domain of authority that God has given them
 6. The Scriptures give numerous commands to these authorities as to how they are to govern (e.g. 2 Samuel 23:3)
- B. There are four spheres of divinely ordained authority in the world
1. Self-authority – God has created us as autonomous beings with a will to choose and make personal decisions that affect our lives
 2. Family – this is the basic unit of society, where parents rule their children, and where provision is made for the care of both soul and body (Genesis 18:19; Deuteronomy 6:7-9; 1 Corinthians 7:36-38; Ephesians 5:22-6:4; 1 Timothy 5:8)
 3. Church – the church is established by Christ for the spiritual well-being of God's people, bearing the "keys of the kingdom" through the gospel, and overseen by pastors/elders (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15; Hebrews 13:7,17)
 4. The state – established by God (Genesis 9:6) for the punishment of evil, the rewarding of good and the protection of the human rights of citizens (Romans 13:1-7)
- C. Problems arise when authorities operate outside of their sphere
1. When the church takes to itself civil power and punishes "heretics"
 2. When an individual takes to himself the civil power and executes vengeance on supposed criminals
 3. When the state intrudes on the family by dictating how parents should train their children
 4. When the state intrudes on the church by dictating how it should worship

II. THE DUTY OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT

- A. The Dominion Mandate of Genesis 1:26-28 sets forth God's design for human life on this earth and government's role in facilitating it
1. It essentially gives all mankind the right and authority have dominion over the earth and to subdue it
 2. In order to fulfil this mandate, men are endowed with certain individual freedoms and rights, such as the right to life, the right to work, the right to a family, the right to acquire possessions and property
 3. Since God has given us those rights, we need human governments to protect those rights and to facilitate our enjoyment of them
 4. Contrary to what many believe, government does not *give* us rights and freedoms, God does – government merely *protects*, *preserves*, and *promotes* our God-given rights and freedoms
 5. God has not ordained governments to provide services such as welfare, medical, education, etc.

6. In many instances, government has usurped roles which God intended for the family or church
 7. "Government should do for people only what they cannot do better by themselves, and no more." (Abraham Lincoln)
 8. The Scriptures support a *protectionist* role of government, not a *perfectionist* role
 9. We are required to not only submit to government in this role, but to support it by paying taxes (Romans 13:6)
- B. Government is ordained by God to punish evil and reward good (1 Peter 2:14; Romans 13:3-4)
1. Good and evil are moral terms not defined by man, but God
 2. God's moral law, summarised in the Ten Commandments, is the foundation upon which governments should be established (Romans 13:8-10)

III. OUR DISOBEDIENCE TO CIVIL GOVERNMENT

- A. When government is acting within the bounds of their authority, and their laws are just, we must obey
1. The reading of 1 Peter 2, as well as Romans 13, shows that the general disposition of Christians to government is one of submitting to their rule
 2. Defiance and disobedience to government should be exceptional for Christians, not the norm
 3. Of all citizens, it is the Christians who ought to be exemplary, model citizens
 4. During emergencies such as war, natural disaster or pandemic, governments may, as part of their role in preserving life and protecting its citizens, set rules that encroach upon the normal worship of the church
 - a. Churches in Britain during World War II were forbidden from showing their lights at night so as not to become targets of bombing raids
 - b. During the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918, churches were closed for a certain period to limit the spread of the virus
 5. But there must be strict conditions upon such intrusions into the church's jurisdiction
 - a. It must be for a *specific*, and *legitimate* cause
 - b. It must be for the general population, not targeting churches only
 - c. It must be for an explicit period of time, after which these intrusions must end
- B. When government acts outside of the bounds of their authority, but doesn't require us to disobey God's commands, we should yet obey, that we give none offence (Matthew 17:27)
- C. But when government acts outside the bounds of their authority, *and* when their commands require us to disobey God's commands, we must disobey
- D. Our obedience to God must come before our obedience to human government
1. When man's law is contrary to God's law, we "ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)

2. There are many instances in the Bible and church history where the saints refused to submit to the laws of governments that would have required them to sin
 - a. The Hebrew midwives refused to kill Pharaoh's command to kill the male children (Exodus 1:17)
 - b. Shadrach Meshach and Abednego refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image (Daniel 3:16-18)
 - c. Daniel continued to pray in defiance of Darius' law (Daniel 6:13)
 - d. Esther violated the law by approaching King Ahasuerus unbidden (Esther 4:16)
 - e. The apostles disobeyed the Sanhedrin's command not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:19-20)
 - f. The early Christians were put to death because they refused to offer incense to Caesar, and acknowledge him as Lord
 - g. In the dark ages, Christians were put to death because they refused to confess that the Catholic wafer was the real body of Christ
3. Christians ought not go looking for trouble (Romans 12:18)
4. But if you are living for God, it will come looking for you (2 Timothy 3:12)

CONCLUSION

1. The rulers of this world have generally no acknowledgement of the God who ordained them, or the role to which he has called them (John 19:11)
2. They ought to hearken to the exhortation of Psalm 2:10-12
3. And we as citizens must know our duty to government according to the Scriptures – to submit to them, except when doing so will cause us to sin
4. In these days of government overreach, and intrusion into the spheres of family and church authority, we need wisdom to discern when we must disobey government
 - ✓ When they forbid the church meeting
 - ✓ When they forbid singing in church
 - ✓ When they demand mask wearing
 - ✓ When they require receiving experimental medical treatments in order to attend church
5. Ask yourself, what are my motives when I find I must disobey the authorities over me – pride, selfish defence of "my rights"? Or is my chief motive the glory of God, and then the salvation of my fellow-men?
6. There is one major difference between the government of the New Testament period and of ours today – theirs was authoritarian, ours is democratic
7. Our system is government *of* the people, *for* the people and *by* the people
8. More than mere subjection to government, we have a duty as Christians to participate and cooperate in the rule of our society through the democratic process
9. May God grant us his grace, wisdom, courage and self-denial as pilgrims and strangers, working to glorify God in our dealings with government and our fellow-man