

by Peter Moore

Introduction

Christians who submit to the Word of God know the principle of Biblical submission to God-given authorities in their various spheres, i.e., citizens to civil rulers (Rom.13:1), wives to husbands (Eph.5:22), children to their parent's (Eph.6:1), employees to employers (Eph.6:5), church members to the elders, etc. It is clear from Scripture, that God Himself has graciously instituted these authorities for our benefit and good (Rom.13:4). However, what is seldom stressed, is that the authority given by God is not an unconditional authority void of boundaries and responsibilities, e.g., can a husband do what he likes with/to his wife, because she is under an obligation to obey him? All people who have been given authority, in whatever form, have the responsibility of exercising that authority under God's ultimate sovereign rule, set out in His sovereign Word.

The Dilemma

Many Christians seem incapable of even perceiving the very real tension that exists when they are expected to submit to a law or command that has been issued by someone occupying a clearly Biblical position (father, civil authority, etc.), but is obviously a violation of God's Word. In the modern world, this conflict happens frequently, and Christians are often caught in a real predicament of what to do. The Scriptures, church history and our own age, record numerous examples of such dilemmas. What would you do in the following situations?

- The year is ad 150 and you live in Rome. Roman law permits the father, as supreme ruler in the t
- The year is ad 298 and the Roman emperor, Diocletian, is in full force with his persecution of the Ch
- The year is 1941. You are a Christian living in German-occupied Holland. You are approached by a
- The year is 1944. The Nazi's are doing a door to door search looking for Jews. They ask you if you
- The year is 1955. You live in Alabama, USA. You are a black woman coming home from a hard day
- The year is 1983. The state is using its army to suppress opposition and is committing unprecedented
- The year is 2001. The civil authority fails to uphold laws, which are supported by the Word of God a
- The year is 2001. The state will not uphold law and order, one of the prime functions of the state (R

The Response

What is certainly needed in each of these situations is clear thinking, faith and wisdom to respond appropriately. God is the God of all reality and records numerous examples in the pages of Scripture showing lawful, righteous protests against civil, as well as other, authority. Often this resistance is recorded in the better known Sunday school stories. However, we seldom recognise the very real issue of civil disobedience inherent in each account. The disobedience recorded in each instance, is not of the same nature or intensity. There are examples of progressive steps of Biblical resistance, dependent on the nature of the godlessness in question. How are we as Christians meant to respond? We are to obey God's Word, as the final and inerrant authority, rather than authorities, although authorised by God per se, who are fallible and errant.

First, there is the case of an individual who knows that a law is wrong, and who protests verbally. The person obeys the command, but voices their objection to the command. Joab did this when David insisted that the people be numbered in a census. Joab, realising that what David had in mind was an affront to the sovereign care of God, voiced his objection to this command before continuing with carrying out the task. Clearly God was displeased—70 000 people died of a plague as a result of David's command (2 Samuel 24:25)! Joab, who recognised the sinfulness of the command and protested, was spared. Joab was faced with a dilemma when David gave him the command. On the one hand he was called to obey the head of state, and on the other hand, such "obedience" would be a breach of the first and greatest commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. This form of resistance probably describes the most frequent way in which we object to something we believe is wrong.

Another way of responding to an order, which contravenes the Word of God, would be to disobey the order and voluntarily suffer the consequences. This is what the 3 young men did when Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to worship the image or suffer death in the fiery furnace (Daniel chapter 3). This is what the disciples did in the book of Acts when they were commanded not to preach the gospel (Acts 5:29).

Another option would be to warn the civil ruler of the evil being ordered and then flee the geographical jurisdiction of that civil authority. This is what Elijah did when he warned the king about God's coming judgement of drought, and then hid in the city of Zarepath in the nation of Sidon (1 Kings 17). Many Jews did this in Germany in the period leading up to the Second

World War and fled to America.

There are other examples where the protester refuses to comply with the law and adopts the strategy of deception rather than flight. The best examples of this in the Bible are the deception of Pharaoh by the Hebrew midwives (Exodus 1), the deception of Jericho's authorities by Rahab (Joshua 2) and the wise men failing to obey Herod's command to bring him information on the birth of the Messiah, Jesus, at the time of the nativity (Matthew 2:9-12).

Another possible response to a command which breaches God's law would be for a group of people, as a corporate assembly, to intervene and tell the ruler that he will not be allowed to implement the judgement arising from a bad law. The Israelites did this when Saul wanted to execute his own son, Jonathan, for having eaten honey during a battle (1 Samuel 14:43-46).

Yet another Biblical response, would be for a God-anointed protester to warn the representatives of the people of the error of the law and to challenge them to rebel against that lawfully constituted authority. This is what Elijah did when he directed the assembled lawful representatives of Israel to kill the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah after they had been clearly shown to be false (1 Kings 18:40).

My final example of Biblical resistance, is when a God-ordained lower official joins with other officials and revolts against unlawful central government after a series of official protests. This is what Jeroboam did when Rehoboam, Solomon's son, imposed harsh new taxes which may have taken the form of forced labour. Jeroboam created a new nation by seceding from the unified kingdom (1 Kings 12:19).

The Conclusion

From the above examples of differing and more serious forms of resistance it is clear that righteous resistance, authorised by God, is not only to happen when the preaching of the gospel is forbidden. Resistance in some shape or form is required whenever God's Law, as has been revealed in His Word, is challenged (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

It's important for Christians to realise that there will always be godless laws as long as there are godless people. The issue is the degree of godlessness and what we are going to do about it. Doing nothing, and rather concentrating on the congregation's program for the year, is tantamount to turning a blind eye. Sure, it often takes real courage to resist evil. Contrary to popular belief, life does not become easier when you become a Christian. The world (and sadly, often fellow believers) will not cheer when you attempt to be light and salt in this world. We need to ask God for courage to stand for the truth contained in His Word and wisdom to determine the most appropriate way to do so. One thing, however, is inescapable, and that is that God expects us to diligently stand for truth, justice and righteousness. Liberty requires responsibility. The Irish patriot and judge, John Philpot Curran (1750-1817), very much aware of the relationship between one's liberty and responsibility, warned his own nation with these words:

"It is the common fate of the indolent to see their rights become a prey to the active. The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt".

Think about these things!