

The New Testament Church
Whom Shall We Obey?
Pastor Paul Jehle – July 8, 2020

“Then Peter and the apostles answered and said: ‘We ought to obey God rather than men.’”
Acts 5:29

In the midst of an unprecedented shut-down of the world’s economy, prolonged fears of lock-downs, and violence in our streets, the body of Christ needs to clearly know when *“we must obey God rather than man.”* Jesus ascended only weeks before Acts 5 and gave the apostles the commission to be *“witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8) They knew what that might mean, since the Greek word for witness is *martyr*. When previously commanded *“not to teach in this (Jesus’) name”* (Acts 5:28), put in prison but miraculously delivered by an angel, their response was to obey God and not man. They *“rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.... and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”* (Acts 5:41-42) There are times when God blesses civil and religious disobedience.

But are we permitted to defy authorities whenever we personally deem it to be against what God wants? The answer to this question is no. But weren’t the apostles correct in their actions? Yes, but the Bible *qualifies* our disobedience by putting parameters around when, and only when, it is permissible to do so. We must, with the apostles, emphasize *obedience to God* more than *disobedience to man*.

Let’s begin spiritually. Are we permitted to directly resist the devil and demonic spirits? Jude 1:9 states *“Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, ‘the Lord rebuke you!’”* In Mark 16:17 Jesus said *“in My name they will cast out demons.”* And in Ephesians 6:11 it states *“put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the enemy.”* In all of these cases, and many more, no angel or believer directly resists the enemy. They do so *in the Lord, in His name, and within his armor*. After all, we can’t resist sin directly either, for we need the *atonement* of Christ’s work on the cross!

Now it should be noted that praying *in* Jesus’ name is quite different than praying *with* His name. *“Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying ‘We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.... And the evil spirit answered and said, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?’”* The demon won and they ran away naked and ashamed. My friends, submission to Christ in our hearts is required to genuinely resist evil. The last thing we want is to resist and find out that God is our adversary and not with us in the conflict.

The natural is a reflection of the spiritual. There are spiritual thrones and there are natural ones, and Christ is Lord of both (Colossians 1:16-17). It follows we are not to directly defy civil authorities for *“whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.”* (Romans 13:2) God created the institution of civil government (Genesis 9:5) and therefore civil rulers, regardless of their character, are *“God’s minister to you for good.”* (Ro. 13:4) This does not mean that blind obedience to civil commands is in order, however. Romans 13 declares the *purpose* of civil government and this sets the parameters for when we must disobey.

The Word of God declares that *“we do not wrestle against flesh and blood”* and thus the person in civil office is not our ultimate enemy. Jesus said *“love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you”* (Luke 6:27-28). Romans 12:18-19 states *“if it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves...for it is written, ‘vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”* Thus, even if it is appropriate and lawful for

us to disobey, we must do so *submissively*, with a heart of compassion and love toward those that we must disobey.

So when and how might it be lawful to disobey? First, our focus must be on *obeying God* not disobeying authorities. James 4:7 states “... *submit to God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you.*” Our first priority is to submit to God, we don’t look for excuses to defy authorities. We might say a key spiritual principle is this, ***the degree to which we demonstrate submission to God and His Word is the degree to which we will be able to submissively resist evil and receive God’s blessing.***

Theologians of the Reformation (Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and others) faced the question, *when civil government in general and kings in particular overstep their bounds, is martyrdom the only alternative?* Their answer, in concert with *Vindicae Contra Tyrannos* (1579) and Rutherford’s *Lex Rex*, (the “law is king” - 1644) set forth the doctrine of interposition. *Resistance to tyrannical rule is only permissible under authority in personal self-defense or under the lesser magistrate.* In other words, individuals must demonstrate submission at lower levels of authority to resist tyranny lawfully at higher levels.

When Egypt commanded Hebrew midwives kill male children, they feared God, deceived the government and “*God dealt well with the midwives*” (Exodus 1:20). When Queen Athaliah seized the throne of Judah by force and overstepped her jurisdiction, Jehoida interposed as a lower magistrate and restrained her (2nd Kings 11). When Uzziah as a civil magistrate attempted to burn incense as a priest, overstepping his bounds, Azariah interposed as a lower magistrate, and God struck Uzziah with leprosy (2nd Chr. 26). In all these cases, *fearing God meant demonstrating submission to Him more than resisting tyranny.*

So when and how should we resist? Consider the following steps that should precede such action:

- Matthew 5:38-41 – avoiding conflict by not taking up a personal offense (turn the other cheek);
- Matthew 18:15-18 – appeal to authority to bring a resolution in order to restore relationships;
- Matthew 10:14 – economic boycott to resist unfair treatment (shake the dust off your feet);
- Acts 25:11 – civil redress using civil appeals (Paul appealed to Caesar as a citizen of Rome);
- Matthew 10:23 – flee to avoid greater conflict;
- Acts 5:29 – disobey when commanded to violate God’s law (freedom to share Jesus);
- Luke 22:36 – forceful resistance in self-defense and under authority – “go buy a sword”

So what about today? Are the lock-downs constitutional? No, emergency declarations must be “narrowly tailored” and “least restrictive.” Quarantines are for the sick, not the healthy. The cure for most disease is the human immune system. Some Governors and Mayors have acted beyond their jurisdiction, but not all legal grounds for resistance are expedient. Is it proper to defend one’s life and property from mob violence? Yes, but remember rights are tempered with responsibilities. Some County Sheriffs, police officers and civil leaders are refusing to enforce unrighteous orders – that is proper interposition.

The church must be careful not to rush to justify resistance. Resistance is the last resort. Our focus should be on “being the church” in our communities and seizing the unprecedented moment to advance Christ’s influence in every way. We are likely to face Christians and churches being targeted, however. We may face forced tracing and a required vaccine in order to travel, buy or sell. We may face direct assault on our homes and lives. In these cases we are to defend ourselves in the fear of God. If we are *commanded* to disobey God, we must *obey God and not man*. It may cost us our job, our freedom and even our lives, but we are in good company in such a dilemma.

So *build relationships* with local officials, neighbors and businesses. Strategically pray for them, and ask God to change the heart of tyrannical rulers for “*the king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water, He turns it wherever He wishes.*” (Proverbs 21:1) Our times are in His hands!