

REFLECTIONS ON NEW TESTAMENT TESTIMONY CONCERNING CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

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A great deal has been written and spoken on the subject of civil disobedience in recent days. This flurry of comment has arisen largely because of the frustration of Christians over the continuation of the practice of abortion in the United States. The most dramatic response has been crystallized in the "rescue movement," which has made its case in the public eye by violating laws against trespassing of private property. Participants in the "rescue movement" have physically blocked doorways to abortion clinics, sometimes in defiance of specific court orders, in order to interrupt intended abortions.

In all the discussion concerning the rightness or wrongness of such practices, the area of least concentration has been the actual teaching of Scripture that might shed light on the subject. Some fresh perspective may emerge on the matter as Scripture itself is allowed to speak.

The present study does not pretend to offer a definitive statement in this area. Instead it is an overview of passages in the NT that might have a bearing on the question of civil disobedience. Although some conclusions have been reached in the process, the greatest value of this material may be found in its providing of raw materials for further discussion.

1. *Matt 2:8: Herod commands the Magi.* "Report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." The response to this command of the king is found in 2:12: "Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."

The Magi did not do what the king commanded them to do. They were not resisting an abstract law, but one directed specifically at them. Although from distant lands, they would appear to have been under Herod's jurisdiction while in his territory.

Under normal circumstances it may be assumed that the Magi would have obeyed the king. To return and give a report to the magistrate at his request would be a good and proper thing. But on this occasion, divine revelation directed otherwise.

The kind of revelation that led to the action of disobedience by the Magi does not continue today, since God's special revelation ceased with the completion of Scripture. As a consequence, this example cannot apply directly to the circumstances of the present day.

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It ought to be recognized, however, that the citizens of the kingdom of God cannot be mindless in their obedience to the directives of the civil magistrate. It is appropriate to make some evaluation of the command of a king. In this case, it was the desire to kill the Christ child.

In receiving their warning from God the Magi were not led to foment a rebellion. Instead they fled for their lives by going in another direction. It may not appear to be a most honorable or desirable option, but fleeing before an unfriendly government is a freedom open to the Christian, as indicated by Christ himself: "Flee to another city" (10:23).

2. *Matt 2:16: the murder of the infants at Bethlehem.* Most frequently designated as the "slaying of the innocents," this passage records an instance of a mass murder of children that might be compared to the abortions of today's society. In his fury, Herod "gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under."

Nothing in the text indicates an organized (or unorganized) resistance to these murders by the residents of Bethlehem. No formal protest is recorded as having been registered with the king, and no action violating accepted civic law is reported. It may have been that the action was taken too rapidly to allow organized protest. But it seems more likely that any protest of citizenry would have been quickly suppressed by the Roman state.

This case differs from abortions today in that the state was itself the executor rather than simply allowing the crimes to take place. But no example of civil disobedience is provided, even though this instance is perhaps the closest to the modern action of abortion in terms of crimes perpetrated.

3. *Matt 4:8-10: the third temptation of Jesus.* "Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Satan offers Jesus authority over the civic powers of the world. Clearly with this power Jesus could have restrained the working of evil by governors.

But Jesus understood that redemption from sin could not be accomplished by his taking over the power of the state as it is presently constituted. Civic authority has no power to renew the heart.

In a similar way, no use of force in the saving of lives by the forced intervention of the individual Christian can communicate eternal life. Indeed, life is precious in the sight of the Lord. But the rejection of earthly power by Jesus says something about the manner in which his kingdom accomplishes its goals. It is his patience that allows earthly powers to work their will while he continues to accomplish his redemptive ends.

4. *Matt 5:19: Jesus' teaching about the abiding character of the law.* "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches

others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

This statement by Jesus underscores the evil associated with breaking or teaching anyone to violate the commands of God. This principle could apply to the present situation in that Scripture teaches that the civil magistrate is to be obeyed in his lawful commands. Practicing or teaching people to do otherwise would be wrong.

The text also might be applied from another perspective. If God has commanded the individual to protect human life by physical intervention and a person fails to fulfill this obligation or teaches people otherwise, he would be guilty of a grievous sin.

The first application possesses a *prima facie* case in its support, while the second hinges on proof that the individual has a responsibility to intervene physically and personally in the stopping of violence, particularly when the state has directed him to do otherwise. Immediately the responsibility of the individual in relation to the responsibility of the state comes into play. In the first case of human murder, the Lord reserved to himself the right of vengeance (Gen 4:15). Subsequently that power was transferred to the state (9:6). These provisions would appear to exclude the right of the individual to avenge murder. In the case of a state's failing in this area, it would appear that civil government should answer civil government rather than the individual's having the responsibility to restrain the state by the use of force.

5. *Matt 10:17-20, 23, 28*. “Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. . . . When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. . . . Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

This passage anticipates a direct confrontation between the disciples of Jesus and civic authorities. Physical maltreatment of Jesus' disciples will be the result.

Jesus encourages his disciples in the response of words that will come from them. He does not suggest a meeting of the challenge of the physical power of the state with physical force. On the contrary, the opposite is implied by the indication that they are to flee.

The admonition not to fear those who kill the body does not minimize the significance of human life. But it provides more than a hint about how Christians should respond to the prospect of being murdered for their faith. They will not fear, and they will not retaliate by physical force, because they understand that the kingdom of God will survive assaults against human life.

6. *Matt 12:3-5*. “[Jesus] answered, ‘Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven’t you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent?’”

This passage records two specific cases in which a “higher” law was regarded as superseding a “lower” law. The law was broken in a time of distress to meet the personal needs of David and his men. It also was broken regularly for the sake of the priests. These Scriptures would seem to put the sustaining of human life above the formal observation of certain laws.

These cases must be examined with care. In the instance of David and his men, a ritualistic law was being violated for the sake of maintaining human life. These laws of the cultus obviously were temporal in nature, and all have passed away with the old dispensation. The case concerning the priests involved the breaking of a prohibition concerning work on the Sabbath for the sake of performing a work of necessity. Actually, the law in its full intent was not being broken, but only in terms of the human mode by which it was expressed.

Now the question may be raised: May temporal laws or laws limited in their scope be violated for the sake of “higher” laws? More specifically, may the state’s law against trespassing be violated for the sake of preserving human life?

Trespassing to stop a murder or a robbery would be proper. Violations of this sort, however, assume the implied permission of the state. But what if the state has explicitly forbidden trespassing under certain circumstances?

All the various possibilities of specific cases that might arise cannot be anticipated. But it should be noted as a principle that the individual in society cannot assume to himself the responsibilities belonging distinctively to the state. Many moral wrongs are being committed under the protection of the state. Acts of idolatry, adultery, divorce, the charging of excessive interest are committed constantly. The Christian individual and the Church as a whole may speak out against all these immoral practices. But it is not the responsibility of the individual citizen to assume to himself the responsibility of stopping these practices by physically opposing governmental powers.

7. *Matt 14:10, 12*. “[Herod] had John beheaded in the prison. . . . John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.”

In this case of murder and outright abuse of civic powers, the disciples of John respond by submission to the powers that be. They do not form protests against Herod, nor do they commit acts of civil disobedience. No doubt their grief is added to the accumulating cry of the martyrs: “Lord, how long?”

8. *Matt 17:24-27: the collection of the temple tax.* Jesus submits to the government and pays the tax, even though as a son of the kingdom of God he is free. Submission to authorities of Church and state is appropriate, even though these institutions may go beyond the responsibility entrusted to them by God.

9. *Matt 22:15-22. "Render to Caesar."* This classic passage on the powers of the state in the teaching of Jesus centers on the question posed to him: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (v. 17).

Jesus asks for a coin. He has his questioners indicate that Caesar's likeness is on it.

"Then he said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'"

Jesus recognizes that Caesar has a realm of authority that properly belongs to him. The radicalness of the analysis of Jesus on the matter of taxation is that ultimately if the government should choose to recall all the money it had issued, it would have the power to do so.

The doctrine of separation of Church and state has strong foundation in this passage. It is not that the Lord does not exercise his lordship over the state through his providential governing of the course of men and nations. In the present era, however, God has determined to separate the direct governance of his messianic kingdom from the temporal governance of the state.

10. *Matt 26:50-54: the arrest of Jesus.* "Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. 'Put your sword back in its place,' Jesus said to him, 'for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?'"

In this case, life clearly is being threatened. It is the most precious life ever to exist on the face of the earth. The life being threatened is not that of an unborn child, precious but nonetheless polluted by the imputation of Adam's sin and by the possession of a sinful nature. It is the life of the spotless, sinless Son of God that is being threatened.

In this case, the power for physical intervention is available. A sword is drawn, and an attack is made.

Jesus responds by directly nullifying the total effect of the sword. He heals the ear, he admonishes his disciple, he commands that he never resort to this method again, and he propounds a maxim: "All who draw the sword will die by the sword." His disciples must not attempt to bring in the righteousness of his kingdom by force.

Jesus further indicates a principle of great importance. If at any time it is the will of God that forceful intervention against the powers of the state is to be exercised, the Lord himself stands ready at an instant to

activate the hosts of heaven. In view of the readiness of God himself to intervene when he chooses, it must be concluded that acts of unrighteousness fall under the scope of the permissive will of God.

It might be suggested that Jesus was opposing the use of active force by his disciples against legitimate authorities, but that passive resistance would be another thing. The civilly disobedient insist that they are civil about their disobedience, using only the tactic of nonviolence.

Yet the full implications of Jesus' response to his arrest must be noted. Jesus does not resist actively or passively, nor does he propose that his disciples obstruct the authorities arresting him. Contrariwise he insists that if God wanted the process to stop he could do so instantly.

It might be proposed that the case of Jesus is a unique one. He was destined by Scripture's predictions to suffer, and so he had to allow himself to undergo this maltreatment. But predictions of a similar nature have been made of his disciples as well. As Paul indicated, he was called to "fill up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1:24).

The resistance of Jesus' disciples to his arrest does not encourage revolt against the state. Neither may this passage be explained away very easily as having no application to the matter of civil disobedience.

11. *Matt 27:11-26: Jesus before Pilate.* Jesus answers the direct question of the governor but makes no effort to defend himself against false accusation. He manifests submission to governmental powers, even to the point of allowing them to take his life on the basis of false accusations.

12. *Matt 28:18-20: the great commission.* "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus claims that he exercises control over all powers in heaven and on earth. The subsequent persecution of his disciples to the death shows that he chooses not to intervene by the direct use of force himself or through his disciples. Instead faith understands that Jesus governs through his ordering of providence. "The heart of the king is in the hands of the Lord [Jesus]; he turns it like the watercourses whithersoever he will" (Prov 21:1).

13. *Mark 8:14-21: the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod.* In the immediately preceding section, the Pharisees had troubled Jesus deeply by asking for a miraculous sign (Mark 8:11-12). In this light the "leaven" of the Pharisees and of Herod most likely is the desire to possess miraculous powers and to live by such. The disciples may have been manifesting the same kind of desire by neglecting to bring bread on their trip (v. 14). They had been fed miraculously just before entering their boat and were manifesting a lazy attitude that hoped to live on the miraculous provisions of Christ. So he warns his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod.

The power of the state as represented by the Pharisees and Herod must be separated from the power of Christ's kingdom. The state cannot expect to fulfill its role by living off the miracles of Christ's kingdom. Instead it must function within the obvious limitations of its temporal power.

The same kind of unrealistic expectation regarding the state may be manifested when civil authority is asked to establish the kind of righteousness that only the miraculous changing of the hearts of people can accomplish. The responsibility of the state to be a terror to evildoers and an encourager to those who do good involves a much more modest calling.

14. *Mark 13:9-11: prediction of the mistreatment of Jesus' disciples.* "You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit."

No mention is made of civil disobedience as a way of resisting this blatant abuse of power by the state. Instead the impression given is one of submission even to abusive authorities.

15. *Luke 1:52-53: Mary's song.* "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." Mary expresses her faith in the superior strength of Messiah's kingdom. The Lord's anointed will rule over the kings of the earth.

Does he do so now? Yes. How? Not in accord with the final form of the kingdom, which awaits the Lord's return in glory, but in accord with the first stage of Messiah's kingdom, in which through specific providences ordered by the Messiah he controls all the activities of earthly authorities. When he returns he will institute justice by the overt display of power. But he does not do so today since it is not of the nature of his present kingdom.

This understanding of the different stages of the realization of Christ's kingdom does not mean that his current program manifests no concern for the poor and the oppressed of the earth in the present era. But it does recognize that the use of power by his disciples as individuals or as a body is not the way he establishes righteousness today.

16. *Luke 1:74-75: Zechariah's song.* "To rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." Zechariah speaks in terms of the promised kingdom and expects Messiah to reign in a way that will enable his people to live righteous lives, defeating all their enemies and enabling them to serve him without fear. In the next verses he speaks of salvation that will come through the forgiveness of sins. The kingdom will be made up of forgiven sinners living in a sinful world.

Redemption in the horizontal sphere, the sphere of man's relation to man in the present world order, must be joined to redemption in the vertical sphere, the sphere of man's relation to God. The redemption accomplished at the exodus would have been nothing but another social movement apart from the blood of the Passover lamb. All redemption of

the messianic kingdom in the present world order must possess the vertical dimension, affecting man's relation to God, as well as the horizontal dimension, affecting man's relation to man.

The continuing presence of sinners in the realm in which God is working redemption indicates that a tension will exist throughout this present era between the actual realization of redemption and those parts of redemption that are to be realized when God's kingdom in its final form becomes reality. We are rescued, and yet we continue to be martyred. It is a part of the order of things in the present era.

17. *Luke 2:3: Caesar's census.* "And everyone went to his own town to register." No murders are being committed, but a massive inconvenience and a large expense is being imposed on the populace. Was it a justified decision by the state? Would Christians have a right to refuse to obey if it did not appear to be a reasonable expectation of the state? Would it be appropriate for Christians to break other laws in protest of such a registration? On the contrary: A model of submission to the laws of the land is provided. The model is not one of civil disobedience but of civil obedience.

18. *Luke 3:12-14: John the Baptist's word to tax collectors and soldiers.* John does not tell his hearers to leave their jobs, indicating that a Christian can serve as an employee in a secular state. He does not tell the tax collectors to evaluate the taxes the government is charging and assess their propriety. Instead he says, "Don't collect any more than you are required to" (v. 13). To the soldiers he says, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay" (v. 14). So the legal powers of the state may be enforced by his servants.

In the case of abortion protests, it would seem sad that Christian law-enforcement officers should be put into the position of having to manhandle their Christian brothers as they carry out their duty of removing illegal protesters. Yet at least one case has been reported of a Christian policeman who resigned from his office because he could not stand the thought of having to arrest his protesting Christian brothers.

19. *Luke 12:4-7: Do not fear those who can kill the body.* Jesus said, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. . . . Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered."

The principal concern of the Christian always must be his relation to the Lord above the protection of his physical life. Physical life is to be treasured as a gift from God. But a much greater concern must be directed toward the souls of men, which are not reached by physical force.

20. *Luke 21:9.* "When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away." With these words Jesus characterizes the present age as it

will continue until the time of his return. He does not envision his disciples encouraging these revolutions as a way of bringing in the kingdom.

In Jesus' day many attempts were made by the Jews to rebel against Roman authority. The Maccabean revolt represented a forcible effort to overthrow the government. On the other hand, the Qumran community embodied the principle of the quietistic revolt. But neither of these methodologies was commended by Christ.

The civilly disobedient of the present day would appear to represent either the spirit of the Maccabees or of Qumran. But efforts to force the government to change its policies in these ways do not appear to be a part of the strategy of Jesus in bringing in the kingdom.

21. *Luke 21:23*. "How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people." Jesus is speaking particularly of the events associated with the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But the circumstances prevailing in that day were to foreshadow the circumstances of the end of time.

In a very distinctive sense, great distress has fallen on pregnant women in the present culture. Such distress may be seen as a "sign of the times." This recognition does not justify a stoic acceptance of the phenomenon. But the Christian should not be surprised to see the appearance of this kind of circumstance in the latter days.

22. *Luke 22:38*. "The disciples said, 'See, Lord, here are two swords.'" Jesus is preparing his disciples for the mistreatment that is sure to come to them. They respond by indicating that they have two swords. They are ready to employ violence in response to their persecution.

Jesus expresses exasperation: "It is enough!" By this exclamation he is not encouraging his disciples to make full use of their swords. Instead he is explaining that they have not yet grasped the basic essentials of the nature of his kingdom.

It could be argued that civil disobedience by Christians today is deliberately nonviolent in its nature. But a distinction between the active force of a sword and the passive force of a limp body is a distinction of degree and not of kind. The intent is the same, which is to compel morality by acts of resistance to the powers of the state.

23. *Luke 23:13-14*. "Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him.'"

No charge of resistance to governmental authority could be directed against Jesus. He had lived a life of submission to authorities.

24. *Luke 22:49-51*. "When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, 'Lord, should we strike with our swords?' And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But

Jesus answered, 'No more of this!' And he touched the man's ear and healed him."

The disciples ask a question about intervening with force to save a human life. They wished to advance the kingdom by preserving the life of the king. An impulsive member of their group does not wait for an answer. He acts. He intervenes forcefully with the sword. Jesus responds just as forcefully: "No more of this!" He sets the tone for his disciples as they face an alien civic power. As he works redemption in the world, physical resistance will not be a proper response to the threat of martyrdom.

In this regard it cannot be argued that Jesus' predetermined death was unique as a category of Christian martyrdom. On the contrary, his death was the chief image for depicting the way of martyrdom for all who die unjustly in his kingdom.

It may be assumed that many and perhaps all infants dying in infancy are numbered among the elect, the redeemed of Christ. Although a direct attack against Christ and his disciples may not be the intent of the abortionist, the murder of the chosen "seed of the woman" is a theme that has a significant place in Biblical theology (cf. Gen 3:15; Amos 1:13; Rev 12:2-4). At least some if not all the victims of abortion may be numbered among Christian "martyrs," if the term may be applied in a less than literal sense.

The implications of this conclusion would be extensive in determining the Christian's response to abortion. The Church should react to the death of victims of abortion as it reacts to the unjust taking of the life of other Christians. While doing all that is within its sphere of influence to curb the practice, the Church responds to this dilemma not by force of arms but by lifting up the martyr's cry of "How long?"

25. *John 6:62-64*. "What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus anticipates his future moment of greatest glory, the point of his ascension in power. But he warns that this power must not be interpreted in fleshly terms. It will be spiritual power.

These words are not intended to suggest that human flesh has no significance. But in terms of power to change the direction of a sinful world, the fleshly force to which people normally resort is completely crippled. Only the Spirit in our hearts can accomplish the needed change. Yet some could not believe in him because he failed to display outward power.

26. *John 18:11*. Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" Now we learn that Peter was the impulsive one who drew the sword in the garden of Gethsemane. This fact is significant when his response to the authorities in the book of Acts is considered. He was the spokesman, the leader of the aggressive-action faction of the disciples. Yet after Jesus' instruction, Peter knows

how to obey God rather than men while at the same time submitting to the power of the state.

27. *John 18:36-37*. "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world [*kosmos*, world order]. If my kingdom were of this world order my servants would fight, in order that I not be delivered to the Jews. But now my kingdom is not from this place.' Pilate therefore said to him, 'Then you are not a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. I have been born for this reason, and I have spoken into this world order for this cause, in order that I might bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.'"

Jesus says his disciples will not fight, and so he defines by contrast the nature of the present world order as he is thinking of it. It is an order in which fighting and force prevail. Power is established by struggle.

But Jesus insists that his kingdom is not of this world order and is not from this (earthly) place. For this reason his servants will not fight to defend his cause. They will not attempt to establish his kingdom by force.

Indeed, the civic authorities have the right and the duty to exercise force under certain circumstances. But the disciples of Jesus will not attempt to bring in his kingdom by the use of counterforce.

28. *John 19:10-11*. "'Do you refuse to speak to me?' Pilate said. 'Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?' Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.'"

Jesus insists that Pilate's powers are completely derived from the hand of God. He could not touch Jesus apart from God's permission. Jesus will not lift a hand in forceful self-defense because he trusts in the power of God to control the governing powers.

29. *John 19:36*. "These things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken.'"

Jesus is preserved even in the agonies of death at the hands of the civil powers. It is important to believe that this preserving power of God will be at work for all his people whenever their lives are being threatened.

30. *Acts 4:18-20*. "Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'" Here is a classic text on the question of civil disobedience. Peter and the other disciples take their stand. They cannot obey men rather than God.

The crucial formulation is found in this last phrase. When the command of men interferes with the fulfillment of God's commands, then without question the Lord must be obeyed rather than men.

In the case of the abortion issue, it is argued that God requires the doing of everything that will preserve life as well as not committing

murder. Since it is necessary to block the door of an abortion clinic in order to save life, God must be obeyed rather than men.

This requirement to preserve life, however, is not without context or restriction. A person may be killing himself by drinking, smoking or taking drugs. But it is not within the realm of responsibility of every individual who knows of this fact to restrain him physically. A person may attempt to persuade. But the individual has not been given the moral responsibility of physically restraining a person from harming himself when the person is acting in accord with the laws of the state.

The same principle would apply to other areas. If the state legalized the use of cocaine or authorized a speed law that almost certainly would result in the loss of human life, it would not be the role of the individual Christian to use physical force in order to stop these actions.

So in the case of abortion, it is not the responsibility of the individual citizen to use force in the restraint of this action. He should speak and testify. But he is not expected as an individual to stop sin by the use of force.

31. *Acts 4:27-29*. "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

This section of Scripture represents another classic passage on the subject of civil disobedience. The closest possible relationship is established between the suffering of the disciples at the hands of the authorities and the suffering of Christ. What the authorities did to God's servant Jesus is now being continued in the threats against these servants of the Lord. As a consequence it may be affirmed that Jesus' response to maltreatment by the authorities provides the pattern for the disciples. Jesus clearly did not respond by force. His disciples must follow the same pattern.

In addition, the great concern of the apostles is with their words. They desire to speak boldly despite the opposition of the authorities. As a result of their expressed desires, the Holy Spirit fills them all and they speak the word of God with boldness (v. 31).

32. *Acts 5:28-29*. "'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,' he said. 'Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.' Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than men!'" These verses represent a third classic passage on the question of civil disobedience. But why are these passages clustering in the early chapters of Acts? The answer may be that this is the point in redemptive history at which the Christian message begins to come into contact with the world. Now it will become clear how the principles of God's kingdom conflict with the powers of this world.

On this third occasion, the assertion of the apostles is more direct. Rather than raising a question—Should we obey men rather than God?—they make a declaration: We must obey God rather than men. Now the principle is firmly imbedded in the tradition of the apostles. It will stand throughout time. Neither the state nor any other authority can stop the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believers will declare the wondrous works of God despite all the restraints people may attempt to place on them.

33. *Acts 5:40-42*. “[Gamaliel’s] speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

This passage confirms what had been reiterated in principle by the apostles previously. They cannot yield to the authorities if they are commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus.

34. *Acts 7:57-58*. “At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.” No evidence of physical resistance to this murder of the first Christian martyr is recorded. Other disciples apparently were present, since they buried Stephen (8:2). But they do not attempt to interject their force as a way to save the life of the martyr.

Scripture does not suggest that the believer should intervene with physical force when persecution arises as a way to save life. As a matter of fact, the pattern instead seems to be submission to the power of the authorities even when they are attacking the one thing most central to the communication of the Christian gospel: the preaching of the Word. Instead of offering physical resistance to the state the Christians scatter (8:4), which is their common response to persecution.

35. *Acts 12:1-5*. “It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. . . . After arresting him he put him in prison. . . . So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”

Persecution to the death is stalking the Church. Their most prominent leaders are being arrested and killed. The Church responds by prayer, not by force. They do not attempt to mount an organized resistance against the government. God takes care of the matter by the miraculous release of Peter and by striking Herod dead. So the word of God continues to increase and spread.

36. *Acts 14:5-7*. "There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the good news."

The combined religious and civil authorities attempt to interrupt the civil rights of the believers. Instead of organizing a resistance movement the Christians move on to the next community, thereby avoiding a confrontation.

37. *Acts 16:35-40: The magistrates command the release of Paul and Silas*. "But Paul said to the officers: 'They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.' The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left." This Scripture reports a fascinating case in which Paul insists on his civil rights. He knew the law and appealed to its provisions to maintain his dignity as a law-abiding citizen in the Roman empire.

This principle might be cited in appeal to the "necessity defense" doctrine as it relates to the issue of abortion. It could be argued that if the state has a law saying the defense of a human life allows for the ignoring of lesser laws, then the violation of certain laws related to trespassing of private property might appear to be appropriate for the Christian in order to save a life.

This reasoning might have validity so long as the act of abortion itself was a violation of the law of the state. Intervention by the individual citizen would then be appropriate. But once abortion has become clearly legalized in a given context, the appeal to this Scripture passage would be inappropriate. For the whole premise of Paul's action is that he is functioning in harmony with the law of the state, not attempting to pit one state law against another.

Paul eventually leaves the town at the request of the magistrate. But he does so at his own pace. First he goes to the house of Lydia and visits with the brothers. Then he departs from the city.

38. *Acts 22:25*. "As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, 'Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?'" Again Paul appeals to his civil rights as a way of protecting himself. Such action would recognize implicitly the God-originating character of the power of the civil magistrate.

39. *Acts 25:10-11*. "Paul answered: 'I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done wrong to the Jews, as you

yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"

Paul submits to the civil powers, even to the point of being willing to have his life taken. But at the same time he makes full use of the legal avenues open to him. Now for at least the third time this point has been made in the book of Acts.

40. *Rom 12:21*. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The response to evil must not be by retaliation with another evil. Instead the Christian must believe in the power of good to overcome evil and restrict himself to the doing of good.

Of course the determination of what is good and evil may be difficult. For instance, is it evil to destroy the properties of an abortion clinic? It would appear so, since it entails the forceful destruction of properties that belong to someone else. Following this principle the Christian would not involve himself in acts of destructive violence as a way of achieving good.

41. *Rom 13:1-7: submission to higher powers*. This passage represents one of the classic statements in Scripture on the relation of the Christian to the civic powers. The full force of its admonitions should be appreciated.

Verse 1 presents two all-inclusive statements. First of all, every person without exception must submit to the higher powers. Whether high or low, Christian or non-Christian, Republican under Democratic rule or Democrat under Republican rule—everyone must submit. Whether a person's views are in the ascendancy or not, he must obey governmental powers.

Second, no governing power exists that is not from God. Just as a difficult circumstance in life may originate in the chastening hand of God, so a difficult government may arise because of the chastening hand of God. In any case, whether dictatorship or collective state, whether democracy, oligarchy or monarchy, no government gets its position of power apart from the providential ordering of God. It is for that reason that the Christian must submit.

The next verse underscores the cruciality of this principle. To disobey the powers that be is to resist God and inevitably to bring judgment on oneself.

Verse 5 indicates that to violate the commands of the magistrate is not only to incur the wrath of the magistrate but also to be condemned in one's own conscience. This internal condemnation makes any suffering at the hands of the magistrate even more painful, since the person suffering cannot appeal to a clear conscience as a basis for encouragement and support.

According to v. 7, the Christian citizen is to give fear to those who deserve fear and honor to those who deserve honor. Killing the natural, innate sense of respect that is directed to those holding rightful places of authority is a course of life full of dangers. The conscience once seared will have difficulty knowing where and how to restrain itself.

These verses address man at a most basic root: his respect for authority and his prompting of conscience. In the case of the abortion question, the Christian instinctively knows he should not break the proper laws of the state against trespassing on private property. Rationalizations that attempt to avoid conscience and the natural respect for authority are extremely dangerous. Consistency with appeals to a "higher" law of breaking conscience and defying authority for the sake of saving a life may lead a person to enter the abortion clinic and physically intervene with whatever force may be necessary to stop the abortion process.

42. *Rom 15:30-33*. "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen." Paul shares with the brothers in Rome the problems he is having with the authorities in Jerusalem. Apparently they have restrained him from traveling.

Paul asks the saints to join him in his struggle. Specifically he wants them to help him not by demonstrating or by exerting political pressure. Instead he asks them to join him "by praying to God for me." This method fits his previous statement that governments are ordained by God and are under his authority. So in a distinctive way the believers may pray for God's intervention in the affairs of government.

43. *Eph 6:5-8*. "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free."

The principles laid down in these verses would apply to the role of citizens in relation to their governments. The Christian must be obedient from the heart to all the lawful commands of government. The obedience of the Christian citizen is to be rendered as though he were obeying the Lord.

On some occasions God may command submission to a pagan governor like Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon even while he himself intends to bring judgment on the tyrant. The cruel practices of rulers today sometimes may be as atrocious as the actions of the brutal monarchs of antiquity. Yet as Calvin points out in his treatment of the responsibility of believers to submit to governments, these same governors are to be obeyed in all their lawful commands. Says Calvin regarding the obedience that was required by God to King Nebuchadnezzar:

We see how great obedience the Lord was pleased to demand for this dire and ferocious tyrant, for no other reason than just that he held the kingdom.

In other words, the divine decree had placed him on the throne of the kingdom, and admitted him to regal majesty which could not be lawfully violated. If we constantly keep before our eyes and minds the fact, that even the most iniquitous kings are appointed by the same decree which establishes all regal authority, we will never entertain the seditious thought, that a king is to be treated according to his deserts, and that we are not bound to act the part of good subjects to him who does not in his turn act the part of a king to us.¹

44. *Phil 1:14, 19*. "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. . . . For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."

Paul is confident that the exercise of governmental authority even in an effort to stop the spread of the gospel actually has resulted in advancing it. He believes that the exercise of prayer by the Christian brothers will prevail to the glory of God. Forced resistance to the power of government is nowhere in his mind, despite their placing him in chains for the preaching of the gospel.

45. *Col 1:16-17*. "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Paul affirms the cosmic powers of Jesus Christ. He currently rules over all earthly powers. Governments are now subject to him. They can do nothing apart from his consent.

Of course, the lordship of Christ over the nations does not mean that Christians are to sit idly by and let governments run rampant in the doing of evil. But they can be content with making lawful endeavors to influence government, trusting that the Lord will exercise his sovereignty where they have no power.

46. *1 Tim 1:9*. "We also know that law is made not for good men but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers."

The purpose of God's law is to testify against murderers and other lawbreakers. The law of the state should offer the same testimony. The failure of the state to see that the law functions in this manner is a most dangerous thing. Wherever the Christian has influence or power, he should see that the law of the land preserves human life.

47. *1 Tim 2:1-2*. "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." This admonition to pray for authorities is not the kind of

¹ J. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.27.

thing with which people would disagree. Intercession for governors is acceptable to all.

But the stress placed on this responsibility may be overlooked. "First of all," prayer is to be offered. Because the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, God's people must give themselves to praying that he will make decisions that will enable them to live in peace and holiness.

48. *1 Tim 6:1, 3*. "All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. . . . These are the things you are to teach and urge on them."

Obedying earthly masters is a form of submission to authority. The principles expressed in these verses may be applied to the relation of the citizen to state authorities. Governors are to be considered worthy of full respect. The purpose of this submission is that God's name and Christian teaching may not be slandered. If proper respect is not shown to authorities, the reputation of the gospel will be hurt. When the lawful commands of the magistrate are ignored or disobeyed, the public testimony of Christians inevitably will be marred.

49. *2 Tim 4:16-18*. "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. . . . But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength. . . . And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack."

Paul evidences by this statement the same kind of attitude that was demonstrated by the apostolic leadership in the book of Acts. Paul employs all lawful means to protect his person as a Christian and a minister of the gospel. But he remains in submission to governmental authorities.

50. *Titus 3:1-2*. "Remind the people [literally "them"] to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men."

Subjection to authorities continues to be a vital issue to Paul. He urges peaceableness in relation to the higher powers as an important trait of the Christian.

51. *1 Pet 2:13-17*. "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone. Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."

This admonition of Peter is very similar to Paul's in Romans 13. The believer should not do any wrong that would cause him to be prosecuted by the state. Instead he must give himself to doing good.

52. *1 Pet 2:23*. "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

The martyrdom of Christ is the fullest embodiment of the proper response to unjust suffering by Christians at the hands of civic and religious authorities. If at a minimum some infants put to death in infancy may be regarded as belonging to the Lord, then the response of Christ to his mistreatment must serve as the model of response for the Christian community to this abuse of civic power. No retaliation, no threatening should find expression. The Christian before the state must take the same position as did Christ and leave the rest to God.

This response to mistreatment must not be confused with passivism. The right of self-defense cannot be denied, nor can the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens and to intervene on behalf of the abused.

53. *1 Pet 4:15*. "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal [literally "evildoer"] or as a meddler."

Peter repeatedly expresses his expectation that the Christian will suffer. But he stresses that the Christian must not suffer as one who is a doer of evil. Nothing that the Christian does should bring into question the good reputation of Christ in the community.

54. *1 Pet 5:13*. "She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings."

This short statement reveals the kind of circumstance in which Peter felt his contemporaries as Christians were living. It is as though they had been deported to the conquering state of Babylon. Yet presuming this sort of environment he urges submission to governmental authorities (cf. 2:13-17).

55. *Jude 8*. "In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings."

The rejection of authority is presented as a sign of the times, one in which the unbeliever participates. Resistance to civic authority is a characteristic of the reprobate that ought to be shunned by the believer.

56. *Rev 6:9-11*. "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed."

Every generation will have its number of martyrs for Christ. The designated number of martyrs must be completed. The Christian community must wait patiently until God finally intervenes to avenge their blood.

The martyrs in their plea do not beg for other Christians to intervene by force as a way of ceasing the brutality. God must intervene to stop this evil.

Elect infants brutalized in the womb may be classified in a sense as Christian martyrs. They contribute to the full number of those slain for Christ. The Church's response to them should be the same as its response to other Christian martyrs. The use of force in defense of Christian martyrs is not the model in Scripture.

As indicated earlier, two religiously fervent communities contemporary with NT Christianity responded differently to the oppressive restrictions of Roman rule. The Qumran community withdrew from society, and the Maccabeans organized armed resistance. Neither the pattern of withdrawal nor the pattern of resistance by force is commended as the way for believers in Christ. The Church today should resist the temptation to follow either the way of Qumran or the way of the Maccabees.

57. *Rev 22:1-3*. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him."

The paradisiacal vision of the tree of life in the midst of the city whose leaves are for the healing of the nations anticipates the final state of things. It is the miraculous work of God that will reconstruct the fallen order of creation. The servants of God will honor him without interruption or interference.

But it must not be expected that in the present circumstance all these blessings will be realized. The higher powers remain under the control of Satan and will be used by him for the persecution of God's people. Yet the Christian can live with confidence about the future and can be assured of the presence of the resurrected Christ in the present.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions may be reached in light of this overview of the testimony of the NT about the subject of civil disobedience. While these conclusions cannot resolve all the questions raised by the current abortion protests, they may provide some significant guidance.

(1) Some cases of civil disobedience are justified by Scripture. Particularly when a command of the government directs a believer to violate a command of God or forbids him to perform actions required by the Lord, especially if they are duties related to the worship of God and the declaration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Christian must obey God rather than man.

(2) A clear distinction must be made between the responsibility of the individual and that of the state in promoting proper moral behavior. The state has the power to enforce proper moral behavior under certain circumstances and within certain limits. But the use of force in the promotion of public morality is not the place of the individual. Particularly when the state has taken a position of protecting the practice of certain immoral actions, it is not the role of the private Christian to use force in opposing these actions.

(3) The Christian citizen must expect that abuse of his person by governments may occur. His response in these instances should be to use every civil right available to him in his personal defense. But he must stop short of exercising force in opposition to civic powers as a way of defending himself.

(4) Some if not all infants brutally put to death in infancy may be regarded as children of God who are victims of the cruelty of a fallen world. The Christian community should respond to their suffering according to the pattern found in the NT.

(5) While doing everything he can that is consistent with his calling to maintain a measured justice in the earth under the present circumstances, the Christian must recognize that he is a pilgrim in this world and must look forward to the arrival of the final civic order established by the Lord in which peace and justice will prevail.