

4-1-1978

The Christian and Civil Disobedience

William E. Hordern

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Hordern, William E. (1978) "The Christian and Civil Disobedience," *Consensus*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol4/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

THE CHRISTIAN AND

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

William Hordern

The question of civil disobedience is a difficult one for Lutherans. Our tradition has emphasized the duty of Christians to obey the government; we tend to look askance at people who deliberately decide to break a law of the state. Other Christians -- such as the Calvinists, the Anabaptist tradition of Mennonites, the Quakers and so on -- have a history of defying governments. In the case of Calvinists, it includes even rebelling against governments. Lutherans have not been so inclined.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

First of all, let us emphasize that we are not talking about revolution -- the attempt to overthrow the lawfully constituted government by unlawful means. Civil disobedience is a conscious and deliberate breaking of specific laws in the attempt to demonstrate an injustice. It is *civil*, not *criminal* disobedience; it is not violence against persons. The aim of civil disobedience is not to overthrow the government, but to get the government to change an unjust law or remedy an unjust situation.

A good example of civil disobedience occurred a few years ago in the Civil Rights movement of the U.S.A. The law of the land prohibited black people from eating in restaurants with white people, riding at the front of buses, using public rest rooms reserved for whites, and using public swimming pools. It restricted their right to work where they were capable or to live where they wished.

The Civil Rights movement, inspired by Christian leaders like Martin Luther King, began systematically to break these unjust laws. The demonstrators were sent to prison, beaten, and killed; but they continued to break the laws until

finally the laws were changed. It is highly likely that those unjust laws would still be on the books if courageous Christians had not shown their willingness to go to jail by systematically breaking the laws. But, what do we say about Christians who break laws?

There are reasons why Lutheranism has a tradition of obedience to the State. Luther's Reformation was a daring and revolutionary act. When he nailed the theses to the door of Wittenberg Church, Luther threw a challenge into the face of the supreme authority of the Middle Ages -- the Roman Catholic Church. Because the church of the time was closely related to the state, Luther was often in trouble with the political rulers. A major result of the Reformation was that the whole area of authority and government was called into question.

Inspired by Luther, other people began to defy the government, to take the law into their own hands and even to launch revolutions. In the precarious political situation of that time, there was a real danger of anarchy. Luther, rightfully, feared that a spin off of his reform would be bloodshed and anarchy. So, Luther emphasized that a Christian ought to obey the state and not take the sword to overthrow rulers. Even when the ruler was unjust, Christians ought to suffer in silence rather than attempt to overthrow the ruler.

Luther made important exceptions to this teaching. Yet even in general, it is important to see that when Luther emphasized the need to obey the rulers, he was not speaking against civil disobedience; he was speaking against armed revolution. But, the result of Luther's emphasis was that Lutherans traditionally have identified obedience to the laws of the State as a prime duty of the Christian.

SCRIPTURAL BASIS

There have been three major Biblical texts which Lutherans have used to defend the view that the Christian is bound to obey the state at all times. First is Romans 13:1 ff: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed . . . for rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad."

Secondly, 1 Peter 2:13 reads, "Submit yourselves to every human institution for the sake of the Lord, whether to the sovereign as supreme, or to the governor as his deputy for the punishment of criminals and the commendation of those who do right."

The final major text is Luke 20:25. Here, Jesus has been asked whether it is right for the Jews to pay taxes to Caesar. He responds, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." These three texts, taken together, have been considered by most Lutherans as conclusive proof that Christians are never justified in deliberately breaking the laws of the lawfully constituted government.

A great crisis for Lutherans occurred when Hitler came to power in Germany. As Hitler moved from evil to evil, many Lutherans began to search

their hearts. Could Christians always obey Hitler?

At the time of the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi war criminals, one major defence was made again and again. Faced with evidence that they had murdered civilians and perpetuated hideous crimes of torture and the like, Nazi officials kept repeating, "I was only following orders," i.e. I was obeying the government.

The charge was made that the Lutheran Church in Germany was partly responsible for Nazism. It was not suggested that Lutherans had advocated Nazi philosophy, but it was charged that the Lutheran Church had drilled into the German people a philosophy of always obeying the state. Thus, even when the state was dominated by the Nazis, Lutherans gave it unquestioning obedience.

It was true that many Lutherans did obey the Nazi state, but by no means all. Pastor Martin Niemuller went to prison. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Countless other Lutherans defied the state by protecting Jews and in other ways breaking the laws. In fact, there is that familiar quotation of Albert Einstein, who had to flee Germany when Hitler came to power. He said that when Hitler came to power he looked for opposition from various groups -- newspapers, universities, political parties, labor unions, etc; but none of these spoke out. The only major opposition to Hitler came from a group from which Einstein had not expected much -- the Christian church. That meant, to a considerable extent, Lutherans.

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE TEXTS

In the opposition to Nazism, Lutherans looked again at the three texts we have mentioned as the bulwark of the view that Christians ought always to obey the rulers. Let us look again at these passages.

In the case of the two passages from Paul's and Peter's letters, the question has to be asked whether these directives are meant as eternal commandments for Christians or whether they were spoken to specific situations. We can never forget that Paul, Peter and the other authors of epistles, wrote their letters to particular people in a particular time and place. Some things they said were meant for all times and places, but other things were simply advice for one particular situation to which they wrote.

If we look closely at these passages, it would seem that they were speaking about the situation of that time. Paul specifically says why the Christians at Rome ought to obey the government. "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad . . . If you do wrong be afraid for he does not bear the sword in vain." Peter gives the same rationale since the purpose of the government is given as "the punishment of criminals and the commendation of those who do right."

Obviously, these passages refer to the situation of the early church. From the Book of Acts we know that, on the whole, the Roman government

protected Christians from various groups that persecuted them. In such a time, Paul and Peter call on Christians to obey the rulers since they are persecuting the evil, not the good.

But, asked Christians in Nazi Germany, what happens when the government protects criminals and persecutes the good? In that case, it would appear that the rationale for obedience given by Paul and Peter no longer applies. Even in the New Testament one sees a shift. As time passed the Roman government ceased to be the protector of Christians and became their persecutor. Thus, the Book of Revelation pictures the government of Rome, not as the agent of God (as in Paul and Peter), but as the agent of the anti-Christ. In short, the words of Paul and Peter are directed to a specific situation where a reasonably good government is to be obeyed because it is maintaining law and order, protecting the good and suppressing the evil; the words do not apply to all governments everywhere. When governments arise which persecute good and protect evil, the Bible can no longer be quoted to justify obedience.

THEOLOGY OF GOVERNMENT

This raises a question about the theology of government. As Luther saw very clearly, if everyone were a Christian and consistently lived a Christian life, there would be no need of governments. But, as Luther quipped, Christians are few and far between and, of course, even Christians are at the same time justified and sinful. Therefore, the State, with its power, is necessary to restrain the sinful attitudes of people, to protect the weak from the strong and maintain a relative justice.

The problem is that sin is universal. Thus, while sin makes it necessary to have rulers, the rulers, too, are sinful. Therefore, every state is partly a protection against sin and partly a protection of sin. Instead of protecting the weak from the strong, most states are controlled by the powerful groups in society. Hence, the state protects the powerful from the weak. Instead of promoting justice, it protects the injustice that exists from all attempts to change it.

The Christian attitude to the government must always be ambiguous. Because of sin, government is necessary, but because of sin, government is always corrupt. So, one has the ambiguity of the New Testament. Because government is necessary, Paul and Peter can call it the work of God. Because it is always sinful, Revelation can call it the work of anti-Christ.

RENDER TO CAESAR

What about Jesus' attitude to rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's? At first sight, this seems a

clear statement. To modern Christians, Jesus seems to be saying, obey Caesar in political affairs and God in spiritual affairs. But, that interpretation is based upon a very modern separation of politics and religion which is totally foreign to the Biblical view. A closer look at this passage is called for.

The first thing to note is that Jesus was answering a trick question. His enemies were out to get him; this is one of a series of questions that they threw at him to trap him. It was like being asked to answer "yes" or "no" to the question, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" No matter what Jesus said, he would be in trouble. If he said, "Yes, pay the taxes," he would be in trouble with the Jews who hated the Romans and resented their taxation system. If he said, "No," the Jews would be happy, but the Romans would be after him for the treasonable action of encouraging people not to pay taxes.

To this trick question, intended to impale Jesus upon the horns of a dilemma, Jesus did not answer either yes or no. He turned the question back upon his questioners. He called for a coin and asked whose image was on it. In good Jewish fashion, Jesus was teaching by action as well as by words.

To fully understand his action, we need to recall the situation of that time. The Jews, with their horror of graven images, prohibited the putting of images of people on coins. But, the Romans, who ruled the land, disregarded this Jewish conviction. The image of the emperor was put upon their coins. This was offensive to the Jews in a double way. Not only did the coin bear an image, but it bore the image of Caesar. Just some ten years earlier than this, the Senate at Rome had voted to pay honour to Emperor Augustus as divine. In short, the Romans believed that their emperor, Caesar, was a divine figure, a god, and they had put the image of their god upon the coins which Jews had to use. The Jew was forced to touch an idolatrous coin in order to do business under Rome.

Given this background, it becomes clear what Jesus is trying to say to his Jewish hearers. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Immediately the Jews are reminded of the first chapters of Genesis. If the coin bears the image of Caesar, the Jews are reminded that they bear the image of God. Therefore, Jesus is not saying that Caesar has the right to rule some area of life and God rules another. What he is saying is that they may give their money to Caesar, it bears his image; but they are called to give themselves to God because they bear his image. You can give Caesar your money, he is saying, but you cannot give Caesar your heart. That belongs to God. You are called to love and serve God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and you cannot serve two masters. Therefore, you dare not give Caesar your whole heart and mind and soul and strength.

When we see this passage in light of the historical situation, it is not saying to us what every government wants it to say. The Caesars of the world would like to see it saying that there are two realms of life -- the religious and the

political. Christians are to give the religious realm to God and the political realm to Caesar. By and large, Caesar does not care what you do with your religious life. You can go into your closet and pray as you like. You can go to church on Sunday. You can study the Bible and sing hymns. You can do all these things just so long as in the political realm you do whatever Caesar asks of you. But, Jesus is saying, not so! You are in the image of God. You belong to God, as this coin belongs to Caesar. Therefore, it is God, not Caesar, who decides just how much obedience you may give to Caesar. As the early Christians put it succinctly, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

Jesus, in his life, illustrated his point. We cannot escape the fact that Jesus was crucified. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment, not a Jewish one. The Jews had no power to execute anyone; so Jesus was not put to death by the Jews. It is a tragedy of history that Christians have often persecuted Jews because they called them "Christ-killers." True enough, the cynical Pilate washed his hands and said that he was not responsible for the death of Jesus. But why in the world have so many Christians been taken in by this cynical act of Pilate? The facts are clear, Pilate alone had the power to crucify Jesus; no washing of his hands nor any other posturing could change that fact.

Secondly, we know that Pilate was a ruthless ruler. History, apart from the Bible, bears witness to that. Pilate was not the kind of person who would let the Jews force him into something he did not want to do. Jesus was crucified because Pilate wanted him dead and buried. However, because Jesus was popular, Pilate tried to shift the blame to the Jewish leaders. It was a machiaevellian act of Pilate, to get rid of Jesus and let someone else take the blame.

Why did Pilate want to be rid of Jesus? The answer is in the events of Palm Sunday. Unfortunately, our church observance of Palm Sunday usually manages to hide the answer. Conveniently we cut off the Gospel readings before they get embarrassing. But, as Jesus rode through Jerusalem on a donkey, in a way to fulfill Old Testament prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, where was he going? He was going to the temple; there he entered in, overthrew the money changers' tables and, as the Gospels make clear, he occupied the temple with his followers for considerable time (Matthew 21:14).

Modern Christians are apt to think that occupying the temple was similar to occupying a church today. But, it was more than that. The temple was a religious centre of Judaism; but it was also a political centre. In the temple was the Sanhedrin -- Rome's puppet government of Palestine. Rome had learned through experience as an imperial power that the best way to rule a conquered people was to set up a group of the natives who had at least the appearance of power. In modern terminology, they were "quislings." When Jesus went into the temple, turned over the money changers' tables and occupied it, he was not simply protesting religious practices, he was throwing a challenge into the face of mighty Rome itself.

Crucifixion, as we said, was a Roman punishment and it was a form of punishment reserved for just two groups -- for escaped slaves and for rebels against the Roman government. Obviously, Jesus was not an escaped slave

and so the fact is clear that he was put to death as a rebel against Rome. When Pilate put over the cross the inscription, King of the Jews, it was to name Jesus' crime; he was a rebel against Rome. Jesus was crucified by Rome because his cleansing of the temple was an illegal act, involving the Roman government in Palestine. The meaning of Palm Sunday is that Jesus was marching through the streets of Jerusalem in order to commit an act of civil disobedience in the temple. Obviously, it broke the law to throw out money changers, overturn the tables, etc. For that act, he was executed. When you render to God the things that are God's and to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, you will often have to disobey or offend Caesar.

LUTHER'S RESERVATIONS

Lutherans have tended to put a great emphasis upon obeying the government in power. But, Luther was very clear that Christians could not give unquestioning obedience to the state. Luther wrote a pamphlet on the question of whether Christians could be soldiers. Over against the Anabaptist, he said yes, they could, if the war in which they were engaged was a just war. But, he went on to say, if your ruler takes you into an unjust war, "Then you should fear God rather than men. And, you should neither fight nor serve, for you cannot have a good conscience before God" (Acts 5:29).

Luther was aware that this was a radical position and he anticipated that people would say to him, "I would be despised and put to shame as a coward, even worse, as a man who did not keep his word and deserted his ruler in need." To this objection, which certainly sounds modern, Luther replies, "You must take that risk and, with God's help, let whatever happens happen." ¹ In short, Luther by no means counselled unquestioning obedience to the state. He advocated civil disobedience where Christians are convinced that the government is calling them to act contrary to God's will. To render to God the things that are God's and to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, meant to Luther that the Christian must refuse to render to Caesar everything that Caesar might demand.

Thus the Christian is not to obey the laws of government under all circumstances. Civil disobedience began with Jesus and, down through the history of the church, a noble group of Christians have been thrown in jail or put to death because their consciences forced them to disobey their rulers. Obviously, this does not mean that Christians are to disobey governments lightly or casually. We are to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and Caesar does have the God-appointed task of maintaining order and relative justice. Disobedience to the state is not justified if it is for our own convenience or preference. We must obey God, not man; that means we are justified in disobeying Caesar only if we do so in allegiance to God.

In a democratic society like ours, there are few times when most Christians are justified in willfully breaking laws. If a law is unjust, we can work to have it

1. Martin Luther, "Whether Soldiers, Too Can be Saved," *Luther's Works*, Volume 46, edited by Robert C. Schultz and Helmut T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 130.

changed. There are legal ways for us to overcome unjust situations. But, as the civil rights movement in the U.S.A. illustrated, when the rights of minority groups are at stake, the normal democratic processes do not offer minorities a legitimate alternative. In theory, the blacks were free to work democratically to change the laws. In practice, they were denied the right to vote and even if they did vote, they were outnumbered by the whites who were not prepared to vote themselves out of power.

What is left to the minority? Does it bear the injustices forever? Revolution is out of the question, because it will be crushed. As Luther saw, the divine purpose of the state is to protect the weak from the strong, but when the strong captures the state, it is used to protect the strong from the weak.

What is left to the weak? The answer of the Civil Rights movement was that civil disobedience is a way to bring injustices to the attention of the ruling group. Many whites, forced to see what they were really doing to the blacks, did work to change unjust laws. It is part of our sinful condition that we can ignore our own injustice for a long time and yet, when it is forced to our attention, we may be ready to do something about it.

In the second place, civil disobedience can create enough annoyance that the ruling groups may be prepared to remove the injustice. It is the same principle as in Jesus' parable of the woman and the judge. When the woman made a nuisance of herself, the judge finally gave her her rights. So, civil disobedience is a particularly apt and sometimes the only way for minority groups, such as the blacks or the Indians of Canada and the United States to get justice.

Jesus said that Christians are to be judged by how they act to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those in prison, because inasmuch as we do it to the least of these, we do it to Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31-46). This means that Christians need to take seriously the attempts of minority groups to get justice. When these groups have to resort to civil disobedience, it is first of all a judgement upon us. If we had used our power to bring justice to them, they would not have to do this. Because we are sinfully preoccupied with ourselves, we have not seen their problems until they forced themselves onto our attention. Because we have not worked to achieve justice for them by legal means, they have had to resort to illegal means. Because we are to obey God, not man, because we are not to render to Caesar what belongs to God, the Church ought always to listen sympathetically to minority groups that resort to civil disobedience. When we do so, we shall often find that obedience to God calls us to support civil disobedience.