

Session to Session

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Abortion, Civil Disobedience, and the Christian

by O. Palmer Robertson

Does the current practice of abortion justify civil disobedience?

Even asking the question might evoke cries that one is "soft" on abortion. Certainly it is clear from Scripture that David, Jeremiah, Samson, John the Baptist, Paul, and Jesus already were consecrated, called, and shaped for service by God while still in their mothers' wombs. It makes one shudder to think about all the persons being aborted every day.

But does this horror justify civil disobedience? Does the worthy end of saving human life justify the means of breaking the law? These are the questions raised in the Church/State Study Paper prepared for the 15th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, and addressed in this issue of *Session to Session*.

A text frequently cited in this matter is Acts 5:29, where the apostles declare, "We must obey God rather than men." We disobey because we must obey God. Clearly, the Bible requires law-breaking when the civil magistrate requires you to sin. If he says, "Don't pray," you pray (Dan. 6:10). When he says "Don't preach," you preach (Acts 4:18-20). If he commands, "Kill babies," you don't kill babies (Exod. 1:17). But the U.S. government has not commanded anyone to kill babies.

God has not given to any of us as individual citizens or to Christians as a body the "force" to compel other men to do what is morally right. The "force" of governing civic activity is given by God to the state, and belongs to the individual citizen only to the degree that the state grants it to him. You as an individual citizen do not have the right from God to "force" your neighbor not to enter a house of prostitution. You have not been given by God the right as an individual to "force" people out of shopping malls on Sunday mornings. It is a usurpation of authority not given you by God if you attempt to "force" morality.

Moreover, it is wrong for the Christian to violate the lawful commands of the civil magistrate. John Calvin made this point long ago in his *Institutes*, IV, 20. The same position was espoused by Abraham Kuyper, the

great Dutch theologian and prime minister. His "Anti-Revolutionary Party" stood against the spirit of the French Revolution and its assumption that the individual citizen had the right to revolt against lawfully constituted government. Calvin stressed that since the lower magistrate also has been granted governmental authority by God, he has the responsibility to resist tyrants. But he insisted that God has *not* given this kind of power to the individual citizen. Francis Schaeffer took a different position in his book, *A Christian Manifesto* (1981), but he did not provide adequate scriptural evidence to support his proposals.

Certainly it is appropriate to search out the rightness of governmental authorities. In our present system, it may be appropriate to test a law to the limit in the courts. But the violation of a proper law as a way of protesting another law is un-Christian. It follows the logic of terrorism. It places the Christian on the level of the world, and makes him an evildoer in the eyes of the unbeliever. No Christian is to be known as a wrongdoer. In the present situation, the breaking of a court injunction against trespassing as a way of protesting abortion is sin, a violation of the Word of God that says the Christian is to obey the lawful injunctions of the state (Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:13-17).

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The PCA and Church Discipline

by Howard Griffith

The General Assembly's "Ad Interim Committee to Study and Make Recommendations As to Structure and Procedure" invariably must raise questions about Church discipline.

Consider the following scene (not at all implausible in our day): A pastor gets into an adulterous relationship; he divorces his wife; he is deposed by his Presbytery for his sin; but he still wants to fulfill what he presumes to be his calling. By using his natural ability to charm, the pastor convinces the Session of the church of his sincere regret with regard to what he calls his "mistakes" (though he does not renounce his divorce), and announces his intention to continue to preach in his church. "This

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The current rash of civil disobedience by Christians arises out of an unrealistic and unbiblical view of the role of the state as it has been appointed by God in the present age. The state today falls into the realm of God's common grace toward the heathen as well as the Christian, and does not function as an agent of God's redemptive grace as does the Church. It is unbiblical to expect that the state today will be "Christian." When Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21), he clearly recognized that by God's appointment a realm of the state existed in the present era that was something other than a theocracy. If the Christian citizen assumes to himself the right to violate the lawful injunctions of the civil magistrate because of the presence of unbiblical laws in the land, he will forever be a civil lawbreaker. If the legal protection of abortion is repealed, what laws shall Christians break in protest of the legalization of lotteries? Of idolatry? Unbiblical divorce? Homosexuality? Christians forever lawbreakers! It's an unhappy picture arising out of an unrealistic and unbiblical understanding of the role of the state in the present era.

But there is a better way. Do all you can as a citizen in this great country, raised up with such unparalleled freedoms in the good providence of God. Speak out, publicly and privately. Preach against the awful sin of abortion. Pray earnestly to the Lord for relief. Fight with spiritual weapons, with divine power, and "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10:5). Write your congressman. Appeal to Jew, Catholic, and pagan, as well as Christian, so that expressions over this issue may come from all quarters of the population.

Abortion is an awful thing. Let us pray and act, not resting until its stench is extinguished. But let us take our actions as men who "know the times," understanding the orderings of God for the present age.

More on Civil Disobedience

by Frederick S. Kuhl

A number of questions are raised by the conclusions of the Church/State Study Paper on the matter of civil disobedience. The Paper rightly exhibits the teaching of Scripture that the civil government is to be resisted when it: 1) commands something specifically forbidden by God, e.g., idol worship; or 2) forbids something specifically commanded, e.g., the preaching of the Gospel. However, the Paper goes further and justifies the disobedience of private persons in order to prevent evil. There is no such teaching or example in Scripture.

The Paper speaks of abortion protesters acting "out of a deep sense of Christian duty," motivated by the imminent

death of an unborn child. It further argues that this sense of duty is derived from the positive command of the Sixth Commandment, and the N.T. command to love our neighbors. The intent of the appeal is commendable; we should think much more about the implications of loving our neighbor. But this application of the command of God assumes rather than demonstrates why a Christian is justified in disobeying the equally divine imperative to obey the civil authority. One might argue that the command to love one's neighbor takes priority over the command to obey the civil magistrate, on the grounds that life itself is a higher value than civic order. But surely the sin of idolatry is even worse than the taking of human life. Are the authors of the Paper prepared to sanction the breaking of civil laws in an attempt to prevent people from false worship? Why not block the doors of the local mosque every Friday? Or of unorthodox churches every Sunday?

The Paper also avoids wrestling with the question of the extent to which the use of force would be justifiable in attempting to prevent sin. In its conclusions, it states that the battle against abortion is at root a spiritual battle. But are the weapons chosen in the strategy endorsed by the Paper really spiritual weapons, as commended in 2 Cor. 10:4, 5 or Eph. 6:12-18? Blocking the door to a clinic may be a *nonviolent* act, but it is certainly not a *spiritual* act. It is a physical or temporal act; it uses the "weapons of the world," learned more from Gandhi than Jesus. If these temporal actions are sanctioned in the name of the Kingdom, why not use other temporal strategies as well?

Indeed, if the Paper proves anything, it proves too much. It seeks only to justify the actions of a few, but if its arguments are correct, disobedience to a civil authority to prevent abortion is not an *option* for a few Christians, but a positive *duty* based on the Sixth Commandment, incumbent upon all believers, the dereliction of which the Church would have the right to discipline in its members. Starting from the idea of a *sense* of duty, the Paper ends up arguing that some Christians have the duty (apparently subjectively determined) to do that which is clearly prohibited for other Christians, thus conflating the idea of Christian vocation with Christian duty.

There is a great irony in the fact that many of the people who champion the conclusions of the Study Paper were not willing to entertain the same conclusions in the 1960s when Christian young men, motivated by a sense of Christian duty, burned draft cards or fled to Canada to avoid taking part in the Vietnam War. If anything, these resisters had a more compelling argument, since they were being asked to *participate* in what they saw as evil. One wonders if the supporters of the Study Paper would be willing to allow their principles to be applied by these sorts of activists as well.

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Presbytery is failing to show Christ's willingness to forgive, even seventy times seven," he proclaims to the elders.

The Session, deeply wishing to believe his protestations, and not wanting to show a Pharisaic spirit, agrees not to disclose Presbytery's decision, and to allow the pastor to continue to preach. The pastor announces a series of sermons for his now deeply-disturbed congregation on the subject "Christ's Unconditional Love." What should the Presbytery do? How can it care for the spiritual interests of the church members and the unbelieving community?

Surely the Presbytery, which has jurisdiction over the congregation and the solemn charge of Christ to watch over the church given to its care, cannot ignore the situation and allow the pastor to continue to represent Christ in that pulpit. An unrepentant sinner, his history notwithstanding, must not stand as an example to the flock, and must not be allowed to preach in the name of Jesus Christ.

Under the terms of the recent proposals of the Ad Interim Committee, a Presbytery would be forbidden to take actions to keep the pastor out of the pulpit. Such an action would be, in the Committee's terms, to "act for" a Session, it being the Session's responsibility to determine who fills its pulpit. Presbytery might give advice to the Session. It might rebuke it. It might remove the Session's right to be represented at Presbytery. It might ignore the whole situation! But the most that a Presbytery could do would be "to act against" the confused and erring Session by dismissing it from the fellowship. (See Exhibit "E", p. 1924 of the Committee Report in the Commissioners' Handbook of the upcoming 15th G. A.).

Suppose the Presbytery were to do just this: dismiss the church from the fellowship. Where would that leave the members of the congregation? The men and women who always had been taught that they needed to "bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" if they were to be saved by Christ would now be wondering about Christ's "unconditional love." "Perhaps unrepentant sinners *will* inherit the kingdom of God. After all, the pastor continues to be accepted by the officers of the church."

And what about the covenant children in this now-dismissed church? The only ones left to care for them are the misguided elders and the charming pastor. Could such a scenario possibly please Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep? Could this be his will for the Presbyterian Church in America? But such a scenario and any number of others, equally damaging, would be quite possible under the Committee's proposed revisions to the *Book of Church Order*.

The Ad Interim Committee has great zeal to protect a

congregation's property, and well it should. Yet no denomination of Presbyterians ever has had so strong a statement protecting the rights of the local congregation in the ownership of its property as does the PCA. Furthermore, if the PCA adopts the Committee's recommendations, it will not avoid the issue of the involvement of civil powers in questions of settling church property disputes. The suggested strategy merely says that the PCA decides in favor of the majority of members from a given Session and congregation. Even if heresy or immorality is promoted by the majority, the PCA will have already decided in that majority's favor.

Finally, the recent proposals of the Committee introduce a very questionable concept into the definition of Church discipline. According to the New Testament, discipline is never exercised so as to be "against" anyone. Rather, it exists for the reclamation of offenders to Christ, whether they are individuals or whole courts, reclamation which is to be attempted from the motive of Christian love for the brethren. Church discipline, at every level, opens and closes the kingdom of heaven, remits or retains sins, by the Word and censures. Sinners need to know God's view of their actions. God has told us to tell them, so they might be saved. The dismissal of a Session or church, as an act of discipline, gives no moral or spiritual aid to anyone. It is really no different from washing one's hands of the responsibility Christ has given for his saints.

Can the PCA really adopt a posture of irresponsibility toward Presbyteries, Sessions, and people? Must we not prefer to be "acted for," for the good of the Church, when need be? Our Ad Interim Committee, beloved and with all good intentions, inadvertently would preclude responsible and loving action on our part, in exchange for the protection of church property. Surely this is an ill-conceived and grave mistake.

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Readings on Civil Disobedience

By Kenneth A. Myers

The issue of civil disobedience is subsidiary to the larger question of the Biblical understanding of the relationship of Church and state, a doctrine that has rarely been clear to Christians. One of the better efforts at explaining it is in J. Marcellus Kik's *Church and State in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962, 46 pp.) This short monograph argues for the separation of Church and state, based on Biblical teaching about the relative authorities of each sphere.

... Civil government was instituted by God, as the moral Governor of the world, and is not derived from

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Christ as Mediator. . . . Civil government operates in the realm of common grace and ecclesiastical government in the realm of special grace.

The institution of the state is not a consequence of Christ's redemptive work, whereas the institution of the Church is inextricably tied to the atonement. The different origins of the respective institutions dictates their different functions.

Kik objects to the idea of a "Christian nation."

Christ employs an analogy which shows the absurdity of attempting to "Christianize" a nation by legislative acts. This is the figure of a vine and its branches which constitute one whole, and possess the same principle of life. "I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). There is no Christian fruit without Christ. Christian virtues cannot be engrafted upon citizens by means of legislative acts. . . . The Headship of Christ over the genuine members of the Church is not the same in kind with that exercised over nations and civil rulers. That the type of Lordship which Christ holds over the Church is radically different from that he holds over the nations, is seen in the fact that Christ himself has fixed its constitution and laws, arranged its institutions, and given to it a special government separate from, and altogether independent of, the civil government of the country in which she operates.

Another useful study on this topic is Edmund P. Clowney's article, "The Politics of the Kingdom" (*Westminster Theological Journal*, Spring 1979, pp. 291-310), a breathtaking survey that focuses on Biblical teaching about the nature of the Church and its ministry.

Clowney interacts specifically with some of the themes in Liberation Theology. An important theme in his argument is from Hebrews 13:14: "We have not here an abiding city, but we seek after that which is to come."

There is no earthly city that abides—not Babylon, not Rome, not Jerusalem. Every kingdom of man will be shaken, every wall shall fall. Yet the author of Hebrews is reflecting not only on the fact that there is no abiding city here, but on the truth that Christians are not given one. The military and police power needed to maintain a political community in this world cannot be sought in Christ's name. Rather, Christians are called to go with Christ outside the walls of the city, bearing his reproach (Heb. 13:12,13).

Clowney points to the difference between "the state as the form of the city of this world and the church as the form of the heavenly city."

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