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Klaas Schilder

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ORDAINED SERVANT

Statement Of Purpose

Ordained Servant exists to provide solid materials for the equipping of office-bearers to serve more faithfully. The goal of this journal is to assist the ordained servants of the church to become more fruitful in their particular ministry so that they in turn will be more capable to prepare God's people for works of service. To attain this goal *Ordained Servant* will include articles (both old and new) of a theoretical and practical nature with the emphasis tending toward practical articles wrestling with perennial and thorny problems encountered by office-bearers.

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1. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.

2. *Ordained Servant* occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Ordained Servant* does not intend to take a partisan stand, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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The Liberation: Causes and Consequences, Cornelis Van Dam, editor, Premier Publishing Winnipeg, 1995, 167 pp. \$7.75 (Canadian).

I found it difficult to write this review. The reason is not the length of this book, or any lack of clarity in it. It is rather the fact that the content of the book is already a kind of report or summation—and it is difficult to summarize a summary! Nevertheless, because of the importance of what the Canadian Reformed Churches call ‘The Liberation’ I have attempted to do it.

The book consists of an edited version of three major addresses given at meetings held in Burlington, Ontario, in October of 1994. The occasion was the fiftieth anniversary of “the ecclesiastical Liberation that occurred in the Netherlands in 1944.” Included with each of the three addresses is an edited version of the discussion—with questions and answers—that followed.

I

Only one of the speakers—Dr. J. Faber—“was an eyewitness of the events” that took place a half century ago. He was asked to deal with the doctrinal issue.

He began by emphasizing Abraham Kuyper’s influence in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands [RCN] in the 30s. Kuyper had spoken of the image of God in a broader and in a narrower sense, of common and special grace, of a visible and invisible church, an external and internal covenant, and so on. In those days, says Faber, there were “lively polemics about the pluriformity of the church, about God’s covenant and about self-examination” and so on. “In many respects,” he continues, “they were a continuation of discussions that had taken place after the union of 1892 between theologians of the Secession of 1834 and of the Doleantie of 1886.” These differences “found a peaceful solution” in a compromise-formula at the General Synod of Utrecht [in] 1905. This formula was framed in such a way that Kuyper’s views—while recognized as legitimate—were not seen as the only views allowed in the Church.

The General Synod of Sneek convened just before the outbreak of World War II. In violation of the Church Order, it continued until April of 1943. Toward the end of this period—in 1942—it issued doctrinal statements about five topics which had been hotly debated during the 30s. The most important, says Dr. Faber, was its statement on the covenant of grace. While it reiterated part of the 1905 compromise-formula it then added the following statement:

“...the seed of the covenant, by virtue of the promise of God, must be held to be regenerated and sanctified in Christ until, upon their growing

up, the opposite should become apparent from their conduct or doctrine.”

And that is not all! This was accompanied by an explanatory statement called *Toelichting* (Elucidation). It required “Classes...to examine candidates for the ministry on these doctrinal points and to assure themselves that the candidates agreed with Synod’s pronouncements.” It was, in effect, the imposition of a *fourth* Form of Unity.

The main issue concerned “the relation between God’s election and God’s covenant.” Did God establish his covenant with the elect (or with Christ, and the elect in him), or did he establish his covenant with Abraham and his seed. Was it a covenant of *election*, or a covenant of *promise*? Faber says Kuyper and other prominent theologians of the Doleantie were supralapsarians. In their thought the doctrine of the covenant was dominated by election. For this reason they spoke of the *essential* or *internal* covenant as made only with the elect. In opposition to this Faber quotes the well-known text in Deuteronomy 29:29—“*The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever...*” Faber says “The covenant is not a secret thing like election but a revealed thing...God establishes his covenant with believers and their children, *all* their children...with Esau as well as Jacob.”

Flowing from Kuyper’s view of the covenant was his view of baptism whereby the “position of all those who are baptized may be called special but...not the covenant position.” Those who opposed the imposition by Synod of this view were unwilling to speak of a twofold covenant, or a baptism that did not, in every case, signify a bona fide covenant position. Faber rightly points out that the Paul (in I Cor. 7:14) says *all* the children of believers *are* holy. He says this term ‘holy’ means “*set apart* from the godless world *and dedicated* to God.” And in this there is no assumption, or presumption at all.

“Those who let the doctrine of the covenant be dominated by the doctrine of election” also made “a distinction between a *conditional* and an *unconditional* promise.” The conditional is an offer. The unconditional is a prediction. It was precisely this “scholastic distinction” says Faber, “that confused Reformed people.” Those who refused to submit to Synod’s pronouncements maintained that there is no prediction here but only the promise of salvation.

True, as the form for baptism says, all covenants contain two parts—a promise and an obligation. The trouble was, says Faber, that under the Synod’s statement “baptism became a sign and seal of internal grace...presumed to be present in

the heart of every child” (and yet not certain to be present). Prior to 1942 this view was tolerated in the Church but henceforth it was to be binding. Dr. Klaas Schilder, and others, refused to submit. The end result was that he—and others—were deposed from office. This, in turn, precipitated ‘the Liberation.’

At this point questions were asked and answered. Perhaps the most important was this: Was it the *binding* that was intolerable? Or was it the *doctrine* itself? Faber’s response is clear and emphatic: it was the *binding*. He said he would not throw a man out of the church who had Kuyper’s view.

Asked about the present state of the CRC in relation to these things, Faber said the CRC deviations are “in a certain way much deeper.” It is not a problem now of a Kuyperian concept but of “the new hermeneutic that leads to all kinds of...unscriptural positions.”

II

The second speaker was Dr. J. De Jong, professor of Ecclesiology and Diaconology at the Canadian Reformed Church’s Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario. He dealt with “Church-Political Aspects.” As Dr. De Jong put it: “although the doctrinal issues set the wheels of division in motion, it was the church-political matters that really led to the polarization between the two groups.”

The Synod issued its demand for conformity in October of 1942. In answer to this, Dr. Schilder wrote a letter to his local consistory (in Kampen) in which he insisted that “the General Synod was a meeting not of churches, but of the *delegates* of the churches, and that these delegates were bound by their instructions and credentials.” He therefore urged his consistory to declare that it could not accept the decisions of the Synod as settled and binding according to Article 31 of the church order. He also asked his consistory to request the classis of which it was a part to take the same position, and it in turn to petition the Provincial Synod to recall the delegates seated at what he called the “presently unlawful” General Synod. His “strategy was aimed at stopping the course of action chosen by the existing Synod, freeing up time for the churches to digest information from that Synod, and setting the mechanics in motion for the organization of a new Synod.”

A new Synod did meet in Utrecht on the 22nd of June, 1943, a few weeks after the previous Synod had closed. It was faced with a large number of appeals but all were rejected. The decisions of the previous Synod of Sneek were declared settled and binding. This was justified on the basis of the use of the word “*ordinarily*” in Church Order Article 50.¹ And the binding was declared

to remain in effect because “it had not yet been proven that its decisions were contrary to Scripture and confession, and the adopted church order.”

Schilder accepted the legality of the new Synod, but in December he sent an advice to the Synod in which he outlined his objections to the doctrinal stand taken by the previous Synod. Three days later the Synod reacted in a forceful way, declaring the doctrinal binding, previously applicable only to candidates, to be now extended to everyone. At this point Schilder, assuming that his advice had been ignored, sent his letter to the churches. This provoked a reaction by the Synod in which his action was called a mutiny causing schism in the churches. A resolution was passed giving Schilder two weeks to change his position, and to declare his submission. In reply Schilder requested the opportunity to present a written defense. With this reply he sent a sealed envelope, asking that it not be opened until opportunity for defense had been given. But Synod rejected the request and opened the envelope. When it saw that the envelope contained a negative answer to the demand for submission, suspension and deposition followed. (A colleague—Dr. S. Greijdanus—had been suspended earlier.) Thus began a series of suspensions of ministers, elders, deacons and even of entire churches.

Eight days after Schilder’s suspension (Aug. 11, 1944) a meeting was held in The Hague for the purpose of liberating the churches. Schilder drew up the Act of Liberation and Return. It followed the model used in the Doleantie of 1886 rather than the Secession of 1834.

Dr. De Jong makes some interesting observations about the significance of Church Order Articles 31² and 50 in this history. The Synod insisted that conformity to all Synod decisions was required *until* those decisions were proven to be in conflict with Scripture, the Confessions and Church Order. But Article 31 does not say “*until*.” It says “*unless*.” And Schilder and the “concerned” insisted “‘unless’ meant that as soon as a consistory or individual found points of discrepancy with either the true doctrine or the accepted order

1 The article begins as follows: “The National Synod shall ordinarily be held every three years, unless an urgent need arises to make it a shorter period...”

2 We quote: “If anyone complain that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right of appeal to a major ecclesiastical assembly, and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the Articles formulated in this General Synod, as long as they are not changed by another General Synod.”

that” there was “a right of appeal, and as such” exempted “from taking the decision as settled and binding.” In other words, until their objections were heard and adjudicated they were not bound.

With respect to Article 50 the “concerned” pointed out that the term “ordinarily” was inserted in the article at the time of the Synod of Dordt for one specific reason. It met when civil authorities had a significant role in the life of the churches. Dordt knew that future Synods could only be held with the approval of civil rulers. The “concerned” therefore concluded that the use made of this term by the Synods of 1942 and 1943 deviated from the original intent. The Synod also cited the fact that the Synod of Dordt had deposed Remonstrant ministers, as over against the view of the “concerned” to the effect that disciplinary power was only given by Christ to local churches.

In any event, as De Jong says, “the immediate cause of the Liberation was the suspensions and depositions which began to be promulgated by the Synod of Utrecht *behind...closed doors*” (my emphasis). And “the most astonishing feature” of it was Synod’s refusal to receive Schilder’s defense of his position. Add to this the novel way of interpreting Articles 31 and 50 and you begin to understand the magnitude of the injustice under which the “concerned” labored.

It is nevertheless noteworthy that Dr. De Jong does not depict the “concerned” as faultless. After all, having recognized that the Synod of Utrecht was legitimate, they did have the responsibility of *proving* that the decision to which they objected was wrong. “This is a point that the concerned did not satisfactorily resolve.”

A point which is not entirely clear to me is this: to what extent was the RCN—from 1942 to 1944—living under special circumstances? “The father of Reformed church polity in Holland, G. Voetius” saw this (as in the time of Dordt) as something which “would allow an assembly to deviate from the terms of the church order.”

From all of this De Jong draws the following lessons:

1. If a federation is not living in the unity of a living faith, no amount of regulations will keep matters on a proper course.
2. Local churches must have valid grounds for refusing to accept certain Synodical decisions.
3. One of the prerequisites for a lasting unity (between the CanRC and others) would be agreement that the Liberation was necessary according to Scripture, confession and church order.
4. Deviations from the accepted church order, and attempts to cover them up, are detrimental to the peace and unity of the church.
5. A schism in itself is always a terrible event.

After this followed another question time. I will mention one or two of the more important ones. Do we really need Synods? Yes, says Dr. De Jong and he cites more than Acts 15, as for example the way in which Paul bound the churches together through support of one another. He also said something that I noted as important in discussions between Presbyterian and Reformed brethren. He said “a classis in the old Church Order has more of a living and abiding character than a regional synod or a general synod. That is how, in my view, the old Church Order was structured.” He says this was lost in the revision process, and he would like to see it restored. So would I.

Another question was this: “Should they [the ‘concerned’] not have gone the church orderly way” exhausting all possible ways of appeal before making the break? Professor J. Ridderbos, for example, was critical of the first words of the Act of Liberation (“reeds geruime tijd”) “for some time now”—an expression taken over from the Act of Secession of 1834. ‘Look,’ Dr. Ridderbos was saying, ‘it has only been two years. Are you really giving us a chance?’” Was this not a serious omission on the part of the “concerned”?

III

The third, and last, contribution was made by Dr. N. H. Gootjes, Professor of Dogmatics, and successor to Dr. Faber. The title of his address was: “The Church in the Act of Liberation.”

Though some things mentioned here were already dealt with in the two previous speeches, there were a number of very important distinctive features. Here is one example: at the very beginning Dr. Gootjes warned that this history must be examined “in the light of Scripture” for, he says, otherwise we would “just live in the past and defend and absolutize our own history.” Another important distinction that Dr. Gootjes makes is between the Three Forms of Unity and the Act of Liberation. Says Dr. Gootjes, quite properly, “office-bearers subscribe to” the former but “do not subscribe to” the latter.

For Dr. Gootjes the crux of the matter is this: “liberation” meant “not recognizing Synod’s doctrinal decisions concerning regeneration and baptism, and the ensuing measures of church discipline” (my italics). Deterioration in church polity as well as in doctrine had been noticed for some time in the RCN by 1942. Well, then, asks Dr. Gootjes “Was the liberation necessary because of this deterioration?” No, he says, “it may sound strange but the answer is in the negative.” He also insists that Dr. Schilder did not try to bring about the Liberation because Synod had turned against him. It only became necessary when Synod adopted

and then *enforced* decisions that deviated from the adopted confessions. “*In other words, the Liberation became necessary when the wrong doctrine was made binding.*” The result was that a minority of less than 10% followed the way indicated in the Act of Liberation. But, as Gootjes observes, it is not the numbers that is decisive but Scripture.

Turning, then, to the relevance of all this for today, Dr. Gootjes warned of three pitfalls confronting our generation. (1) The scholarly world no longer accepts the Bible as the Word of God. (2) The rampant individualism of our society. And (3) the danger of traditionalism

It seems to me that Dr. Gootjes emphasized this third danger as a special one for the Canadian Reformed Churches. Having said that the “danger of a small community is the tendency to treat our emphases as confessional issues”, he goes on to mention as examples (1) a certain method of preaching, and (2) what he calls “our system of schools.” He points out that ethnic churches, like ethnic communities, “tend to hang on to their customs and backgrounds” and warns that the Canadian Reformed Churches “are subjected to that danger as much as anyone else.” The Act of Liberation, he insists, warns us against making our specialities into conditions for church unity.

Dr. Gootjes goes on to say some important things, also, about church cooperation and unity. There are ways, he says, in which we can work together—in a limited way—even with Roman Catholics. But we must also note the dangers. “When the real communion is experienced in an organization...instead of the church, something has gone wrong.”

In the discussion that followed another Professor at the Canadian Reformed Seminary—Dr. J. Geertsema—asked quite pointedly if Dr. Kuypers’ doctrine “can and should be tolerated in our...churches?” As far as I can see this question was not directly answered—not categorically answered—by Dr. Gootjes. But in a concluding section entitled “Afterword: The Liberation and Catholicity” Dr. Faber does answer it. Here is his statement in full: “We should not bind candidates and parents and covenant children to academic constructions of theologians but to the clear teaching of Holy Scripture. We do not infringe upon the place of supralapsarian theologians such as Franciscus Gomarus or Alexander Comre or *Abraham Kuypers* (again, italics are mine) within God’s catholic church, but as Reformed believers we do not want to be bound by their theological ideas as if they were the revealed truth of God” (Emphasis mine).

Dr. Cornelis Van Dam, editor of the book containing these speeches and the discussions that followed, also responded after the speech of Dr. Gootjes. He noted that perhaps a fourth danger should be mentioned, namely, secularization. He also has something important to say about what I would call the religious climate in the RCN during the 30s and 40s. As Dr. Van Dam notes “there was a sense of having arrived. Everything was pretty well down pat. There were a few doctrinal matters that needed attention, but everything seemed to be under control. There was a sense of ‘we have made it. We have our churches, our schools, and our organizations.’ The moment you get into that frame of mind you get problems.” As the proverb says: ‘Pride goeth before a fall.’ [A longtime and enthusiastic student of Schilder, who was one of the founding fathers of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand—but who did *not* join the *Vrijgemaakt*—also noted this triumphalism as the root of the disaster. Let us hope that this will be further explored in future publications from Premier].

And now a few of my own comments.

(1) This book strengthens my conviction that, in the main, the *Vrijgemaakt* people were in the right.

(2) The refusal of the Synod to receive a written defense from Schilder was, in my opinion, a truly heinous sin. It is hard to see how he can be blamed for what followed when he offered, in effect, to furnish proof to the Synod that its decision was wrong, only to be informed that the Synod would not even consider it.

(3) Yet having said all that, it is regrettable that the ‘concerned’ called for secession so swiftly. I think they could have tried other means of redress first. This consideration is all the more weighty when we remember that the doctrinal view at issue had been present in the church—even in some of its most noted leaders—long before this time, while no one (even among the ‘concerned’) had considered this sufficient reason to break with the Church.

(4) As in Scottish Church History, the most tragic result, in my view, is that when the church is divided over a single issue the fallout is so unpleasant that the church may lose the ability to act later on even when there are *many* issues—and much *more blatant* issues—that cry out for militant action.

(5) Finally, I find it very encouraging indeed that these men from the Theological Seminary of the Canadian Reformed Church were willing to take such an honest and critical look at their own past history.

(6) I heartily welcome and recommend this book.

RENDER TO ALL WHAT IS DUE THEM

*What Every Christian Needs to Know about
Honoring Civil Authority and Paying Taxes*

by Attorney David G. Hagopian, Esq.

Not long ago, one passionate Christian implored his fellow believers to join him by resisting the authority of the government with these stirring words: “We ask our fellow Christians to consider in their heart a question which has tormented us, night and day...How many must die before our voices are heard? How many must be tormented, dislocated... or murdered? How long must the world’s resources be raped in the service of legalized murder?”

With equal passion, still another advocate of disobedience to governing authorities defended his conduct on the well-known news program, Nightline, by taking the following tack:

Interviewer: Did you break a law?

[Advocate]: Yes

Interviewer: How in the world do you expect a jury to find you innocent?

[Advocate]: Well, we hope to show in this trial that the reason I broke the law was more important than the reason the law was made.

Interviewer: And the reason you broke the law?

[Advocate]: The reason I broke the law was to save lives.

It is not surprising that those who uttered these stirring words of resistance appealed to the cause of saving life, since there really is no higher moral road anyone can trod to justify such resistance. What is surprising about these words, however, is *who* uttered them: not a Christian pro-life advocate, as you might very well imagine. Rather, these stirring words were uttered, respectively, by Father Berrigan of the Catonsville Nine as he protested the Vietnam War and James Walker, who was arrested a few years ago for illegally distributing sterilized needles to drug addicts, ostensibly to prevent the spread of AIDS.

Not only do activists, both Christian and non-Christian, appeal to the cause of saving life to justify their disobedience to governing authorities, their distinctively Christian counterparts often appeal to the “higher law” of Scripture even when their reasoning is often unscriptural. What, then, does the “higher law” of Scripture really say about our duty to obey civil authorities? When, if ever, must Christians dis-

obey the state? And what about our obligation to pay taxes, even when they may be unjust or oppressive?

In the following two-part study, we will answer those all-important questions by examining what the “higher law” of Scripture says about the nature and limits of our obedience to the state in general and about our duty to pay taxes in particular. In this article, we turn to the more general issue of what the Bible says about the obedience or honor we owe the state. With that general foundation firmly in place, the next article will address the specific issue of our obligation to pay taxes.

AVOIDING THE EXTREMES

The critical question before us in this article is relatively straightforward: when, if ever, must Christians disobey the state? History reveals a whole host of answers to that question, two of which are mutually exclusive but equally erroneous in light of a truly biblical view of “higher law.”

At one end is what we can call *the anarchist extreme*, which holds that because the state is inherently evil, Christians should never, in principle, obey it. No one can deny the fact that the institution of the state postdated the Fall. But that does not mean that the state is an inherently evil institution. After all, the institutional church postdated the Fall too, but that fact alone does not make it an inherently evil institution. Far from being an inherently evil institution, we shall see that the state was established by God, is vested with legitimate, albeit derivative, authority by God, and is generally to be obeyed. We are under a general obligation to obey those in authority over us.

Just as the anarchist extreme erroneously teaches that obedience to the state is never biblically justified, so some have gone to the other extreme by teaching that disobedience to the state is never biblically justified. We can call this latter view *the statist extreme*. This view has come in many guises, but was particularly prevalent among those who attempted to defend the divine right of royalty. Among other things, the statist extreme holds that because the state is a divinely ordained institution, we should always obey it and should never disobey it.

The Anarchist Error
 (Never Obey/Always Disobey)
 The Statist Error
 (Always Obey/Never Disobey)

|
 The Biblical View
 (Generally Obey, Except Disobey
 When Satisfy Biblical Criteria)

While Scripture teaches that Christians are generally obligated to obey those in authority over them, it also teaches, as we shall see, that under certain circumstances, Christians not only are entitled, but actually *obligated*, to disobey the state. That is, Christians are required to obey God rather than man. Most of the time, obedience to God will result in obedience to man. But sometimes, obedience to God will require us to disobey man.

FINDING THE BALANCE

Having briefly seen how the anarchist and statist extremes fall short of the standard of Scripture, we will now examine in detail what Scripture says about the nature and limits of the obedience we owe to the state, which can be summarized in five basic principles. If we properly understand these five principles, we will find that they help us wade our way through the sometimes difficult matrix of arguments for and against any movement calling on Christians to disobey the state.

Principle One:

All Authority Belongs to God

The Westminster divines were right on the mark when they wrote that God is “the supreme Lord and King of all the world . . .” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Ch. 23:1). What they were saying, of course, is that absolute authority belongs to God alone. He is the sovereign Lord who possesses “*all authority...in heaven and on earth*” [Matt. 28:20, (all quotations taken from the NASB)]. He created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1) and everything in them (Ex. 20:11; Neh. 9:6). All things are “from Him and through Him and to Him” (Rom. 11:36). Not only did He create all, He also possesses all. “*The earth,*” declares David, “*is full of God’s possessions*” (Ps. 104:24). He owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 90:10), a symbol of the whole earth, which also belongs to Him (Ps. 24:1). In fact, absolutely everything belongs to Him (1 Chron. 29:11; Gen. 14:19; Ex. 9:29; Deut. 4:39; 10:14; Job 41:11).

As the eternal Creator and Possessor, He alone is the eternal Ruler, the One who has jurisdiction or control over everything. There are no boundaries to

His authority. He is not like a law enforcement officer whose authority is limited to certain territorial boundaries. God’s authority knows no boundaries. His jurisdiction is absolute. All that is in heaven and on earth is His because He is exalted as head above all and has dominion over all (1 Chron. 29:10-11). He is the Lord who has absolute authority and dominion everywhere, over everyone and everything. His reign, we are told, extends to the ends of the earth (Ps. 59:13; 103:19; Neh. 9:6). The Lord has “*established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all*” (Ps. 103:19; Matt. 28:18). And His rule will never end: His throne is everlasting (Ps. 93:1-2; 97:1-2; 99:1-2; Dan. 7:13-14). He is, and will forever be, preeminent in all things (Col. 1:18), for He is the head of all (Eph. 1:17-23), the One who has been given the Name which is above every name (Phil. 2:9-11). He is truly the “*King of kings and Lord of lords*” (Rev. 19:16). He alone is the Lord. He alone has absolute authority.

Principle Two:

God Has Established Civil Authorities

Scripture not only teaches that God alone has absolute authority, it also teaches that God has established legitimate authorities here on earth and has given them real, but limited, authority. Put differently, all human authority in every sphere of life ultimately comes from God through Christ and is ultimately limited by His absolute authority: (1) *at the individual level*, each man is to exercise authority over his own life under God (*self government*, Gal. 5:23); (2) *at the familial level*, the husband is to exercise authority over his wife under God; and parents, over their children under God (*family government*, Eph. 5:22-6:4; Col. 4:18-21); (3) *at the ecclesiastical level*, elders are to exercise authority over their congregations under God; and presbyteries (or their equivalents), over elders under God (*ecclesiastical government*, Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-3; 1 Tim. 5:12; Heb. 13:17; Acts 15); and (4) *at the occupational level*, employers are to exercise authority over their employees under God (*occupational government*, Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 4:22-5:1).

In addition to teaching us that God has ordained different spheres of government in the individual, familial, ecclesiastical and occupational realms, Scripture also teaches us that God has ordained government in the civil realm (*civil government*), whereby magistrates exercise authority over their citizens under God. In his epistle to the church in Rome, Paul teaches us about civil government when he writes that “*there is no authority except from God and those which exist are established by God*” (Rom. 13:1). Wisdom personified continues in much the same vein when, in

Proverbs, she declares, “*By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, all who judge rightly*” (Prov. 8:15-16). God is the one who “*establishes*” one ruler and “*removes*” another (Dan. 2:21; Ps. 75:6-7), for He is the Most High who rules the kingdom of men and “*bestows it on whom He wishes*” (Dan. 4:17). Rulers are given their authority by God (Jn. 19:11).

In fact, it is precisely because God vests civil rulers with legitimate authority that Scripture elsewhere refers to them as “*gods*” (Ex. 21:6, 22:8, Ps. 82:6), “*ministers*” (Rom. 13:4) and “*servants*” (Jer. 27:6, Rom. 13:6). These exalted titles are bestowed on them not because they are deities or clergymen, but because they receive their authority to rule from God Himself. They are vested with divine authority from God and are to rule in a representative capacity for Him. According to Scripture, then, rulers do not rule by chance, fortune or happenstance; nor do they rule because of some contrived “social compact” or even because of “the will of the governed.” Ultimately, they rule because God has ordained and established their rule by His sovereignty and upholds their rule by His providence. Succinctly put, God “*hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people*” (WCF, Ch. 23:1).

**Principle Three:
Christians are Generally Obligated
to Obey Civil Authorities**

Because God has established civil authorities and vested them with legitimate, albeit derivative, authority, we are generally commanded to obey them. This general command to obey civil rulers is rooted in the fifth commandment, which teaches, at the most general level, that we are to honor (respect and obey) those in authority over us (“*Honor your father and your mother ...*” — Ex. 20:12; Deut. 20:16). While the fifth commandment focuses on one particular type of authoritative relationship in society — that between parent and child — the obligations flowing from the fifth commandment by no means end there.

Properly understood, the fifth commandment teaches us to respect and obey those God has put in authority over us. The basic idea behind the fifth commandment is obvious: just as children are to obey their parents, so we are to obey those whom God has put over us in every sphere of life: wives are to obey their husbands; children, their parents; congregations, their elders; employees, their employers; and citizens, their rulers. To the question, “What does the fifth commandment require of me?” the Heidelberg Cat-

echism correctly answers:

“The fifth commandment requires that I show all honor, love, and fidelity to my father and mother, and to *all in authority over me*; submit myself to their good instruction and correction; and also bear patiently with their weaknesses and shortcomings, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand (Q. 104, emphasis added).

And the Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches us that the fifth commandment

“...requireth the preserving the honour and performing the duties belonging to every one, in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals.”

In other words, the fifth commandment teaches us about how to honor those in authority over us in every sphere of our lives and the duties we are to perform as we submit to them.

Even though the fifth commandment, standing alone, would be sufficient to impose a general obligation on us to obey civil rulers, Scripture quite explicitly teaches us the same truth in other passages. Proverbs 24:21, for instance, commands such obedience: “*My son, fear the Lord and the king. Do not associate with those who are given to change.*” Far from running with rabble-rousers (“those who are given to change”), we are to fear God and those He has put over us. In Titus 3:1-2, Paul commands Christians to

“...*be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.*”

Along the same lines, Peter commands the readers of his first epistle:

“*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. ...Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king*” (1 Pet. 2:13-17).

As opposed to cursing rulers (Ex. 22:28; Eccles. 10:20; 2 Pet. 2:10; Jude 8), Peter tells us to honor them and to submit to them. Paul adds that we ought to pray for them, as well (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Elsewhere, he expands upon our general duty to honor and submit to civil rulers when he tells us we are required to obey them since by so doing, we are obeying God Himself. In the

first seven verses of the thirteenth chapter of Romans, he writes:

“Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’s sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.”

Paul and Peter not only inform us that generally we are to obey civil authorities; they also tell us why we are to do so. First, we are to obey civil rulers as a general rule because they have been ordained by God and because God commands us to obey them. Generally speaking, to obey civil rulers is to obey God, and conversely, to disobey them is to disobey God. That is why the apostle writes that *“he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God”* (Rom. 13:2). Peter goes so far as to classify those who *“despise authority”* with those who *“indulge the flesh”* (2 Pet. 2:10). Obedience to civil rulers is thus a moral duty binding upon the conscience of the true believer (Rom. 13:5).

Second, we ought to obey civil authorities because those who unjustifiably disobey may very well be punished by the state (i.e., suffer the wrath and perhaps the “sword” of the state — Rom. 13:3-4). They may also subject themselves to divine punishment (i.e., they will receive a sentence of *“condemnation upon themselves”* — Rom. 13:2).

Third, God commands us to obey civil rulers because obedience generally provides a sound Christian testimony. In the words of Peter, when we obey rulers, we *“silence the ignorance of foolish men”* (1 Pet. 2:15).

Notice, as well, that Paul and Peter are indifferent to the particular form of government in power at a given point in time. We are commanded to obey the *de facto* government, no matter what form it may take. As the Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, reminds us:

“...obedience is due to all who rule, because they

have been raised to that honour not by chance, but by God’s providence. Most people are in the habit of inquiring too closely by what right power has been attained, but we ought to be satisfied with this alone, that we see that they exercise power. Thus Paul cuts off the handle of useless objections when he declares that there is no power but from God.” [*Calvin’s Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (Rom. 13:3)].

Whether the government is a monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy, republic, democracy, some combination thereof, or something altogether different, is simply beside the point. Generally, we are to obey whatever power God has ordained precisely because it is ordained by Him.

**Principle Four:
Scripture Does Not Permit Christians to Disobey
Unjust Civil Authorities Who are Evil or Who
Merely Permit Evil**

So far we have seen that God possesses absolute authority, vests civil rulers with legitimate authority, and commands us generally to obey such rulers. This general obligation to obey civil rulers applies even when they may permit evil in our midst. To be sure, Scripture admonishes rulers to rule justly and righteously. Toward that end, they are to render careful judgment for the Lord and fear the Lord (2 Chron. 19:5-7); rule righteously in the fear of God (2 Sam. 23:3); show discernment, worship, and do homage to the Son (Ps. 2:10-12); deliver the oppressed and those led away to death (Ps. 82:1-4, Prov. 24:11-12; 28:16); rescue the needy and the destitute (Deut. 1:16-17); judge impartially and turn their faces from bribes (Deut. 16:19; 2 Chron. 19:7); hate unjust gain (Prov. 28:16); and punish the disobedient while encouraging the obedient (Rom. 13:3; 1 Pet. 2:14). In short, they are *“to do justice and righteousness”* (2 Chron. 9:7-8; Jer. 22:3). The only way they can do so, though, is by ruling in accordance with God’s standard of justice and righteousness as revealed in Holy Scripture which is a transcript of the justice and righteousness of God.

Despite these admonitions, no human ruler will ever perfectly obey God’s perfect standards of justice and righteousness as revealed in Holy Scripture. Often, in fact, rulers are unjust and permit injustice to reign supreme. Sometimes God even raises a wicked ruler to judge His people (Job 34:30; Hos. 13:11; Is. 3:4, 10:5; Deut. 28:29).

But what is our responsibility to rulers who fall short of their divine mandate by being or permitting

evil? Some Christians have asserted that we may actually disobey rulers who are evil or who permit, rather than command, evil. On the contrary, Scripture nowhere permits Christians to disobey rulers who are evil or who merely permit evil. When the state permits, instead of commands, evil, Christians can avail themselves of every legal means of effecting a godly end or of protesting or reforming the permitted evil. But they do not have a biblical prerogative to turn state-permitted evil into a license to rebel against the state. God clearly commands Christians to submit to rulers who permit, instead of command, evil.

As we have already seen, our general duty is to obey civil rulers. This general duty means that obedience is the rule, and disobedience, the exception. In addition to our general duty to obey civil rulers, several biblical examples, recorded in Scripture for our instruction (Rom. 15:4), teach us to submit to rulers who may permit evil or who are personally evil themselves.

To begin with, Scripture introduces us to the not-so-venerable King Saul, the first king of Israel. Toward the end of his reign, Saul was bent on wickedness. Even though David had already been anointed as the king-elect, even though Saul pursued David's very life, even though David justifiably could have taken Saul's very life in defense of his own life, David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declares "... *who can stretch out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be without guilt?... As the Lord lives, surely the Lord will strike him, or his day will come that he dies... The Lord forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed*" (1 Sam. 16:9-13; 24:6, 11; 26:9-11). Hence, even though Saul was wicked and abused his God-given authority by seeking David's life, David refused to lift his hand against Saul because he realized that to lift his hand against the Lord's anointed was to lift his hand against the One who anointed him: the Lord of Hosts. Instead of rebelling against the unjust Saul, David knew that Saul had been ordained by God and that vengeance belonged to God alone.

Not only does Scripture tell us that David refused to rebel against Saul by slaying him, Scripture also teaches us that God's people were to submit to Nebuchadnezzar, the same wicked ruler who oppressed them by taking them into captivity in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was a wicked ruler who permitted evil of all kinds. Nonetheless, Scripture declares in Daniel 2:21, 37-38:

"[I]t is He [God] who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes

kings... You, O King [Nebuchadnezzar], are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength and the glory; and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all."

Although Nebuchadnezzar was a wicked tyrant, he was nonetheless ordained by God and was, for that reason, the servant of God. All nations, he was told by the prophet, would serve him, and any nation that refused to serve him would be cursed by God (Jer. 27:5-8, 17). In addition to being raised by God and called God's "servant," the wicked Nebuchadnezzar was also to be supported by the prayers of the people he conquered. After being taken captive into Babylon, the people of God were commanded to pray for the very tyrant who captured them and took them into captivity: "*And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare*" (Jer. 29:7).

Then there is the example of Nero, perhaps one of the most wicked tyrants the world has ever known. As the fifth Roman emperor after Julius Caesar, Nero died in A.D. 68. As such, he was the emperor who was most likely on the throne when Paul wrote Romans and Titus and when Peter wrote his first epistle. Yet in Romans, Titus, and First Peter, Paul and Peter commanded Christians to obey civil government. In fact, Paul and Peter wrote to quell any insurrectionism or revolutionary ambition on the part of the apostolic church. Even assuming that Romans was written between A.D. 55 and 59, several years before Nero's famous bloodbath of A.D. 64, the Roman Empire was far from "model" at that time. Even before A.D. 64, Rome was no heaven on earth. The Roman Empire permitted all sorts of evil, including abortion and oppressive taxation. Yet even though Roman emperors permitted abortion and exacted oppressive taxes from their people, New Testament writers did not issue a call to armed revolution. Nor did they call on private citizens to take up the sword of the state. In fact, they never even came close to issuing a call to civil disobedience or tax resistance. Rather, they explicitly commanded Christians to obey, and to pay taxes to, the very civil authorities who permitted abortion, exacted oppressive taxes, and promulgated other evil statutes and decrees. Scripture, then, takes great pains to teach us that we must obey civil rulers who may even permit evil.

Thus, Scripture provides no safe harbor for those who teach that Christians may disobey rulers who merely permit evil, or who may use otherwise lawfully

collected taxes for evil purposes. On this score, Calvin rightly observes that the propensity of rulers to sin and to allow others to sin is no reason for Christians to fail to submit to them. Because God has appointed rulers, Calvin writes that however much they may fall short of their divine appointment, the Christian must not on that account cease to cherish what belongs to God.

Elsewhere he writes that although civil rulers often depart from their duty to encourage good and punish evil,

“...we must still render them the obedience which is due to rulers. If a wicked ruler is the Lord’s scourge to punish the sins of the people, let us reflect that it is our own fault that this excellent blessing of God is turned into a curse.” [*Calvin’s Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (Rom. 13:3)]

Again, in his commentary on 1 Peter 2:13-16, Calvin encourages Christians to obey rulers who may even be enemies of Christ. After admitting that such rulers abuse their God-given authority, Peter still exhorted the Jews “...to show respect to the civil power.” Calvin continues by writing:

“It may be objected here that kings and other magistrates often abuse their power, and exercise tyrannical cruelty rather than justice. Almost all the magistrates were like that when this Epistle was written. To this I answer that tyrants and those like them do not do such things by their abuse, without the ordinance of God still remaining in force, just as the perpetual institution of marriage is not subverted even though the wife and the husband behave in an unseemly way. However men go astray, the end fixed by God is unchanged in its place.” [*Calvin’s Commentaries: The First and Second Epistle of Peter* (1 Pet. 2:14)]

To illustrate the obligation Christians have to obey overbearing civil rulers who permit evil, Calvin draws our attention to the home. In particular, he focuses on the relationship between a godless husband and a believing wife. A godless husband who is disobedient to the word of God must still be obeyed (1 Pet. 3:1). He may be godless and may practice and permit evil of all kinds, but the institution of marriage endures, and his believing wife is to obey him nonetheless. His wickedness is not an abdication of his authority and does not lead to the dissolution of the marital bond. The same is true of overbearing parents. Although fathers in particular are commanded not to

exasperate their children or provoke them to anger (Eph. 6:6; Col. 3:21), even when they do, their children are to obey them (Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20). An overbearing father is still a parent, and as a parent, he is to be obeyed. Just as an overbearing husband and father is to be obeyed even if he is evil or permits evil, so an overbearing civil ruler is to be obeyed even when he permits evil. It is that simple.

Those who claim that Christians may disobey rulers who fall short of their divine appointment by permitting evil have not thought through the logical implications of their position. Were state-permitted evil to justify disobedience, we could disobey civil rulers all the time, since fallible human rulers, in one way or another, will always fall short of God’s perfect justice by permitting evil in one sphere or another. Followed to its logical conclusion, therefore, the notion that state-permitted evil justifies disobedience leads down the slippery slope to continual anarchy and rebellion. Scripture countenances no such position. We ought not to do so either. Perhaps this is why Calvin taught that even tyrants who are “wild savage beasts” ought to be obeyed since there has never been a tyranny which fails to do some good and since “some kind of government, however deformed and corrupt it may be, is still better and more beneficial than anarchy.” [*Ibid.*] For these reasons, then, we are commanded to obey rulers even when they may permit evil or even when they may be evil themselves.

Principle Five:

Christians Are Required to Disobey Man Only When They Are Commanded to Sin and Have No Legal Means to Obey God

If Scripture neither permits nor requires Christians to disobey civil authorities who merely permit evil, may Christians ever justifiably disobey authorities? An accurate view of God’s higher law, unlike the inaccurate views echoing in some corners today, reveals that Christians must disobey civil authorities only when such authorities command them to sin and only when that command to sin leaves Christians with no legal means by which they can obey God. We must be put in a situation where obeying man means disobeying God.

Christians Must be Commanded to Sin

As we have already seen, Christians are not permitted or required to disobey human authorities when those authorities merely permit or tolerate evil. Rather, those authorities must command Christians to sin. Since we can sin by doing what God forbids us to do, or by failing to do what God commands us to do,

Christians must disobey rulers only (1) when they are commanded to do what God forbids (sins of commission), and/or (2) when they are forbidden to do what God commands (sins of omission). This truth comes leaping out of the pages of Scripture.

Recall that Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives and Moses' parents to kill Hebrew male children (Ex. 1:15-22), a command that contradicted the law of God (Gen. 9:6). Exodus 1:22 says that, "...*Pharaoh commanded all his people saying, 'Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive.'*" Because God's law forbade unjustified killing, the Hebrew midwives and Moses' parents were commanded to do what God forbade. As such, they were obligated to obey God rather than man. (Actually, Moses's parents may have obeyed the letter of the law by "*casting*" Moses into the Nile!)

Later in biblical history, we learn that the king of Jericho commanded Rahab to turn over the Hebrew spies she was harboring (Josh. 2:3), a command that contradicted God's demand of her in the situation since it would have made her an accomplice to murder. The text explicitly states that "...*the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house...'*" Because she was commanded to sin, she was obligated to obey God rather than man.

We also learn the same Biblical truth from the fire-tested faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were commanded to bow their knees to a false god (Dan. 3:1-30), a command which contradicted the law of God (Ex. 20:3-6). In Daniel 3:4, for example, we clearly see that the three Hebrew youths were commanded to violate Scripture: "*Then the herald loudly proclaimed: 'To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn...you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar has set up.'*" Because God forbade idolatry, and because Nebuchadnezzar commanded the Hebrew youths to commit idolatry, the Hebrew youths were obligated to obey God rather than man.

In the pages of the New Testament, we learn that Herod commanded the Magi to report the whereabouts of the Christ child (Matt. 2:1-12) so that Herod could kill the child. Note that God, by special revelation, commanded the Magi not to return to Herod: "*And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way*" (Matt. 2:12). Since Herod commanded

the magi to do that which God forbade, the Magi were obligated to obey God rather than man.

The Biblical narrative, then, is exceptionally clear: the Hebrew midwives/Moses' parents, the Hebrew youths, Rahab, and the Magi were all commanded by force of law to do what God clearly forbade. As such, they were obligated to obey God, not man. But Christians are obligated not only to disobey man when they are commanded to do what God forbids, but also when they are forbidden to do what God commands. Think of Daniel. Recall that the satraps of King Darius cajoled him to enact a binding law which forbade others, including Daniel, to pray to anyone other than the king (Dan. 6:1-30). Because Daniel understood that he was to worship God alone, Daniel was forbidden to do what God commanded. As such, he was obligated to obey God rather than man. The same was true of the apostles who were forbidden to evangelize in Jerusalem (Acts 4-5), even though Christ specifically commanded them to do so in Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. In Acts 5:28, the Sanhedrin proclaimed: "...*We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name [Jesus]...*" At this juncture, Peter and the other apostles uttered one of the most frequently misquoted verses in all of Scripture: "*We must obey God rather than man*" (Acts 5:29).

Those who appeal to Acts 5:29 to justify their civil disobedience rarely understand the true meaning of this text. As we have already seen, Christians may not disobey rulers who merely permit evil. Many who advocate Christian disobedience interpret this verse to mean that any time man's law falls short of God's law, we may disobey man and obey God. But is that what Acts 5:29, understood in context, really teaches?

Read in context, Acts 5:29 teaches that when one is put in a position where he must either choose between obedience to God or obedience to man, he must then obey God rather than man. In other words, in order to disobey man, the Christian must face a genuine dilemma: the command to sin must leave the believer with no choice but to obey the one or the other—*either* God *or* man. Hence, Acts 5:29, rightly understood, teaches us that the believer is obligated to disobey man's law only when man's law truly contradicts God's law, that is, only when the Christian is put in a position of choosing between man's law or God's law. Of course, this is just another way of saying that before any Christian disobeys the state, he must not have any legal means by which he can obey God.

***Christians Must Not Have Any Legal Means
by which They can Obey God***

Just as Scripture teaches that Christians who disobey rulers must be commanded to sin, so it also teaches us that those who disobey must have no other legal means by which they can obey God. As we saw above with Acts 5:29, the Christian is obligated to disobey the state only when he faces a situation in which he must choose between obeying God or man, when there is no other option. Remember that in Acts 1:8, Christ commanded the apostles to evangelize specifically in Jerusalem, then in Samaria, and then in the remotest parts of the earth. In Acts 4-5, the Jewish authorities forbade the apostles to evangelize in Jerusalem as Christ had specifically commanded. They had no alternative but to disobey man and to obey God. Obedience to man would have meant disobedience to God.

We have already seen that God established civil rulers and commands us to obey such rulers, even when they permit evil. If Scripture really teaches us that our general obligation is to obey those in authority over us, then obedience is the general rule and disobedience, the exception. Hence, Christians must try to work within the system before they resort to rebelling against it. If, for example, saving the life of the unborn is your goal, and you can save life legally, then as a Christian you must forego illegality and save life legally. Disobedience, for the Christian, is always a last resort.

This important truth, though, not only follows from an accurate interpretation of Acts 5:29 and by good and necessary consequence from the presumption of obedience to the state already discussed at length in this article, it is also taught in a number of passages. One need only think of Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh (Ex. 5:1-21), Ezekiel's legal public protest (Ezek. 4:1-5:17), Daniel's diplomatic request (Dan. 1:8-16), Obadiah's legislative reform (1 Kg. 18:3-16), Esther's self-humiliation (Esth. 5:1-2), Peter and John's defense before the rulers, elders and scribes (Acts 4:1-20); and Paul's judicial appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:1-27) to name only a few illustrations. While it is true that many of the individuals named above eventually turned to disobedience, they first tried to work within the system before they rebelled against the system.

Against this backdrop, George Grant has rightly observed that a "veritable arsenal of Scriptural tactics has been supplied to the believer in order to stay him from the last resort of rebellious confrontation." With poetic prose, Grant continues by asserting:

"Though tyranny may incline zealous disciples toward...activism, though godlessness may

provocate grief in their bowels of compassion, though the barbarism of inhuman humanism may rankle their wrathful ire, believers have a Scriptural mandate to do God's work, God's way, in God's time...To advocate civil disobedience before the exhaustion of alternate resistance is to thwart God's redemptive program and the rule of law." [*The Changing of the Guard*, p. 159.]

In our era, it seems that many well-intentioned believers have forgotten this all-important truth. But no matter how many forget or attempt to minimize this truth, it nonetheless cuts to the quick any "Christian" movement which prematurely resorts to disobeying the state. Instead of allowing our activism, compassion, and ire to lead us down the path of unwarranted disobedience to the state, Christians who are true to Scripture must seek to channel that activism, compassion, and ire toward fully exhausting their legal alternatives before they resort to disobedience. We are required to disobey man only when obeying man requires us to disobey God.

SUMMING IT ALL UP

While Christian proponents of civil disobedience often tout a "higher law," this brief survey has shown that their actions often reveal a profound misunderstanding and misapplication of that higher law. God's higher law, properly understood, teaches us that God (1) possesses absolute authority, (2) establishes civil authorities, (3) commands Christians generally to obey such authorities, (4) does not permit Christians to disobey authorities merely because they are evil or may permit evil, and (5) requires Christians to disobey authorities only when such authorities command them to sin and only when that command to sin leaves them with no legal means by which they can obey God.

In light of this accurate view of God's higher law, we will be able to work our way through the arguments for and against any civil disobedience movement. Next time, we will build upon the foundation we have laid in this article as we discuss the sometimes taxing question of our obligation to render to Caesar what is Caesar's.

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THE 'CHRISTIAN SOLDIER' AND 'HUMBLE SERVANT' MODELS: A PARADOX FOR PASTORS?

by

Rev. Robert B. Needham

I.

INTRODUCTION

Probably almost none of us Americans—even we who have been blessed with God's gracious salvation and sanctification in Jesus Christ—have fully realized the profound effect Greek philosophical thought has had on western society. One of the most pervasive—and problematic—Greek thought patterns is the antithetical concept of “either-or.” In many ways we have an instinctive inclination to frame complex issues with an “either-or” format even when it is not legitimate.

For example, we tend to assume that all professing Christians are *either* Calvinists *or* Arminians, when, in fact, many hold to an amalgam of notions taken from both doctrinal systems. The fact that such eclectic thinking is neither logically or theologically consistent is beside the point. When have Americans, in significant numbers—except in the earlier times, when influenced by Puritan thought—concerned themselves with drawing consistent conclusions from sound and consistent presuppositions anyway?

Thus we tend to think that parents either should (*always*) spank their children, or *never* spank their children; that pastors should be *either* strong aggressive leaders *or* humble servants of their sessions; *either* that God is absolutely sovereign, *or* that man is wholly responsible; *either* that wives should submit without exception to their husbands *or* that spouses should have unqualified “equality”; *either* that parents should not interfere with their teenagers freedom of expression at all *or* that they should exercise complete control over their teen's activities, and so on.

I hope these few illustrations serve to make the point that many important issues of life have more than one facet, and that either oversimplified position (the left ditch or the right ditch exclusively) does injustice to many complex issues, and that a godly “mean” must include elements from both perspectives.

Thus, parents who employ a laissez faire attitude toward their children's “social” activities are as cruel to their children as those parents who smother their offspring with micro-managing every detail of their lives. What is needed, instead, is a godly balance, grounded in a humble dependence on God's word blessed by the sanctifying grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. This alone will provide that wise and knowledgeable parental oversight of maturing children, combined with individually tailored liberties based on each child's demonstrated maturity and capacity for consistently responsible behavior.

However, such wise nurture takes much discipline, prayer, humility and persistent effort. Thus Scripture sometimes calls us to the “*both-and*” perspective rather than an exclusive “*either-or*” approach—especially in matters of life and Christian maturity.

For the record, there are, of course, many clear “either-or” issues in Scripture. We are either adopted sons and daughters of the living God, or sons of the devil. Either we are saved or lost. We are either elect or reprobate. We exercise either repentance unto life and saving faith in Jesus Christ as He is revealed in Scripture, or we don't. In matters of theology—such as the truth of God's redemption—the “either-or” dichotomy is almost always clear cut. But in matters of sanctification it is often the case that what, at first sight, seem to be irreconcilable

opposites are, in fact, equally important aspects of the truth.

(1) *“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset [us], and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,*

(2) *Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of [our] faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.* (Hebrews 12:1-2)

II.

THE SOLDIER-SERVANT 'PARADOX'

The apparent paradox of the Christian soldier in God's armor, and the humble bondsman of Jesus Christ selflessly following the Savior's suffering servant model—*unless dealt with according to applicable biblical constraints*—will tend to produce believers who follow either the aggressive and, for some, even pushy Christian warrior model or the humble (doormat?) Christian servant model. *Both* the servant *and* the soldier models are commanded in Scripture (e.g. Ephesians 6:10-20 and Matthew 20:25-28 & 23:11). But can they both be followed? Is it actually possible to “live” both models? The answer is “Yes!!” However, we must add one strong qualification, namely that a God-honoring integration and application of both models is *impossible* if we look at one, or both, through secular or cultural “filters.” In our culture there is hardly any understanding of the biblical concept *either* of theocentric, God-defined soldiering, *or* theocentric, God-defined “servanting.” Having enjoyed the (sometimes spiritually painful) privilege of serving twenty-one years on active duty with the United States Navy, I am prepared to attest in any public forum, that a grasp of biblical soldiering or biblical servanthood is rare, even among professing believers who are members of the uniformed services.

One terrible example of this theological deficiency is the matter of “pride.” Since I am the most familiar with the Navy and Marine Corps, I will confine my illustration primarily to these

two services, although the problem exists just as severely in the Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard.

Scripture warns us, in the most unambiguous terms, that *God hates pride* in every form and expression.

Proverbs:

6:17 *A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,*

8:13 *The fear of the LORD [is] to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.*

11:2 *[When] pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly [is] wisdom.*

13:10 *Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised [is] wisdom.*

14:3 *In the mouth of the foolish [is] a rod of pride: but the lips of the wise shall preserve them.*

15:25 *The LORD will destroy the house of the proud: but he will establish the border of the widow.*

16:5 *Every one [that is] proud in heart [is] an abomination to the LORD: [though] hand [join] in hand, he shall not be unpunished.*

16:18 *Pride [goeth] before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.*

16:19 *Better [it is to be] of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.*

21:4 *An high look, and a proud heart, [and] the plowing of the wicked, [is] sin.*

21:24 *Proud [and] haughty scorner [is] his name, who dealeth in proud wrath.*

28:25 *He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife: but he that putteth his trust in the LORD*

29:23 *A man's pride shall bring him low: but honor shall uphold the humble in spirit.*

Christ reinforced this luminous teaching of the Old Testament on three different occasions when He declared that *“He who exalts himself will be abased, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* (Matthew 13:12; Luke 14:11 & 18:14) The Holy Spirit inspired other New Testament

authors as well to warn God's people of this deadly and seductive sin. James 4:6 "...Therefore it says, 'God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'"

While on active duty, on literally hundreds of occasions when hearing an unsolicited declaration of pride expressed about someone or some thing, I would admonish professing Christians, as well as obvious or covert reprobates and nominal practitioners of generic churchianity, to guard their hearts against the sin of pride. With few exceptions those I confronted would take great umbrage that I would dare to criticize "pride." I admit that pride is now uncritically embraced as the cardinal virtue in America, whereas our ancestors rightly recognized it as the root sin from which all others spring! In sum, Christians, for the most part, showed little or no greater discernment on this matter than pagans! On many occasions, when proposing that the official mottoes of the Navy and Marine Corps ("*Pride and Professionalism*" and "*The Few, the Proud*" respectively) were problematic at best, and corrosive at worst, my remarks again and again were met with anger, defensiveness, bafflement, hurt and almost invariably the plaintive question, "Aren't there any good kinds of pride?" And generally their dismay would increase when I answered? "No." Sadly, one of the most tragic ironies of this "perceptual schizophrenia" was the fact that the Navy's official motto ("*Pride and Professionalism*") was invented by a staff officer working in the Pentagon Navy Public Affairs Office, a professing Christian who expressed to me genuine amazement to the point of being dumbfounded at the thought that "his" motto, embraced so enthusiastically by the Navy, was actually unbiblical. He later agreed that for years he had habituated this dichotomy in his own thinking—on Saturday afternoons and Sundays thinking like a Christian, and then, from Monday morning to Saturday afternoon, thinking "like a Naval Officer."

With this example of endemic confusion about the sin of pride laid out, let us return to the matter of integrating the soldier-servant concepts in Scripture.

There are so many significant military refer-

ences in both the Old Testament and New Testament, that dealing with them all would be impossible in a paper of this size, so some choices are necessary. In my opinion, the place to begin is with Christ's encounter with the centurion, as recorded in Matthew 8:5-13. What ought to rivet our attention is the fact that Christ, who corrected and admonished many, and did not commend many, acknowledged with some level of real astonishment the expressed faith of a master sergeant in the Roman Army as greater than any He had found amongst the Jews.

While it is noteworthy that Jesus never exhorted the centurion to leave the army (even to this very day one of the cruelest military organizations ever known to man), He clearly approved of the theological and epistemological foundation of that soldier's stunning level of vibrant faith. That concept was (and is) the principle of the usually necessary and refreshing austerity of the military authority system, as functionally expressed in the hierarchy of authoritative ranks. Quite simply, the centurion (unlike most Jews—and, we might add, most Americans who bow before the altar of individualism and independence) understood that he gave orders to those subordinate to him, and obeyed the orders of those ranking superiors in his chain of command.

In all the years I spent with the Navy and Marine corps, I never saw an exception to this fact, namely, that the first reason, above all others—for which American servicemen got into trouble with their command—was their reluctance or outright unwillingness to obey orders. Very few personal or family crises I dealt with did not have at their core failure to obey legitimate orders from duly authorized Superiors. In the Chaplain Corps I saw more young chaplains ruin their careers for that reason than all other causes combined. Remember, that "chaplains" are simply ordained ministers, rabbis or priests with military commissions.

Sadly, I believe that in our reformed churches we see the same problem—young ministers who will not submit, graciously, to their Session's oversight; elders and deacons who do not submit to their Session, and members who will not submit

to, or even resent the authority and oversight of, the elders. It is easy to forget that the test of true submission is a demonstrated willingness to obey an order or requirement that we don't personally like. (Please don't confuse this with the one proper exception to God's requirement for obedience, namely, when we are told to obey a commandment that is clearly unbiblical and sinful.) Obeying a commandment with which we agree is proper, and in a real sense, commendable, but it does not prove submission.

Other soldiering principles in Scripture are central in secular military service as well as in the army of Jesus Christ, such as the sacrificial self-denial necessary to accomplish basic training, as well as the obvious loss of certain civilian freedoms and privileges. The necessity of proper defensive and offensive equipment is absolutely essential for the successful prosecution of warfare (Ephesians 6:10-17), as is proper strategic and tactical planning prior a decision to avoid or to undertake a campaign (Luke 14:31-32, Proverbs 20:18). Adequate, intense and realistic advanced training is a known necessity if military personnel are not to be demoralized. It also provides them with capable, morally sound and selfless commanders who will lead them well under fire. David's refusal to drink the water brought to him by two of his soldiers is an example of an effective commander's proper regard for his troops. A sad insight into our present military unpreparedness is the loss of that once normative standard for any U.S. military commander, namely that one *always* sees that the troops are properly fed, sheltered, and—where appropriate—paid before taking care of his own personal needs. When I was commissioned in 1968, that was still admired and practiced. When I retired from the Navy in January, 1992, it was, in my considered opinion, rare. Elitist arrogance and even abuse of some of the privileges of rank had become common—as had the growing contempt expressed by enlisted personnel towards their officers.

In the church of Jesus Christ, at the end of the 20th century, we have seen many heartbreaking examples of the sheep being misled and exploited by false shepherds, who treat them more as servants to be exploited, rather than co-laborers to

be cared for, nourished, taught and, yes, trained.

Now let us move over to the servant model. This is a nonnegotiable requirement for those who would “serve” Jesus Christ. Let us note that the verb “to serve” and the noun “servant” come from the same Latin root word “servus”—a slave or serf. We cannot too often remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, *“But the greatest among you shall be your servant”* (Matthew 23:4) and *“you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”* (Matthew 20:25-28).

If you are following the Scriptural line of thought on Biblical servanthood—faithfulness to the master (the one in authority over the servant) becomes the cornerstone of God-approved service. The Gospel of Luke is especially rich in servant concepts. *“That servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But the one who did not know it, and committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more”* (Luke 12:47-48). This, let us not forget, is part of Christ's application insights at the conclusion of His parable dealing with the differences between faithful and unfaithful servants.

As part of His exegetical treatment of the (for some) puzzling parable of the unrighteous steward (Luke 16:1-8), Christ reiterated a theme which occurred again and again in His teachings—namely, the permanent importance of obedient, submissive, faithful service. *“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much”* (Luke 16:10).

Now let us return to the military model. The truly effective military leader is not one who postures, struts, and abuses his authority, but

one who humbly serves *both* his superiors in the chain of command (obeying with wisdom and alacrity) *and* his subordinates (by caring for them so they can fight effectively in the time of battle). When the final jury on military history reports in, it may well turn out that Joshua was the greatest military leader of all time. Not only did he lead an effective campaign, but he was noted for his personal righteousness. Unlike David, he was not self-corrupted in later life. But most important of all, Joshua knew how to *submit* to his commander in chief. The extremely brief but profound military-spiritual encounter between Joshua and the pre-incarnate Christ luminously underlines Joshua's leadership suitability and competence. He understood that unqualified submission to the Captain of the Lord's Hosts (the permanent, greatest, and most significant military title in all time and eternity) is expressed by immediate obedience to his command. The command to worship took precedence over all other strategic, tactical, and logistical concerns. In my experience, most military men in the United States Armed Forces have forgotten that these great organizations are historically and legally referred to as the *Military services*. The military servant forces, if you will!

Here, then is the glorious principle which totally eliminates the apparent contradiction between the requirements of a militant Christianity and Christian service. Both realms of *service* to the King are to be grounded in a disciplined, conscious submission to the Master/Commander under whose perfect authority we serve. The same leadership qualities which make great military officers are those which make extremely effective overseers or stewards of the master's servants.

When we must face an enemy of the gospel, whether individual or collective, we are to put on the armor of Christ, and "fight" according to our Commander's (Christ's) standing orders. When we deal with Christ's sheep, we are to shepherd them humbly, gently and without abusing the collective authority given to the elders.

It is no accident that military leaders who arrogantly abuse their authority and abuse their troops, are as despised (and sometimes even hated) as are ministers and elders who arrogantly

disregard Christ's commandments to oversee His flock in humility and submission to His commandments.

To further dissipate the artificial, secular and wrong "either-or" wall between the Christian soldier and the Christian servant, let us remember that as spiritual soldiers, we are ever to "fight" the enemies of the gospel with the same disciplined humility and submission to the Lordship of Christ required in our treatment of believers.

There is so much more to consider, but let us close with this thought. A right understanding of our God-ordained place in the authoritative structure of the Church is indispensable to effective and blessed service to the saints as a right understanding of our place in the military chain-of-command is absolutely indispensable to effective military service and leadership.

In light of these principles, Christ's comments about obedience, take on a deeper significance, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:10). Love for Jesus Christ—effectively expressed and lived—can never occur outside the disciplined and willing acceptance of our place in God's authority structures, of which Christ is the absolute head (Matthew 28:18).

And this love applies not only in terms of personal obedience, but obedience in the context of collective service to the saints, and properly militant evangelism that is bold, because it is righteous, and is righteous because it is, by God's grace, in submission to His will in all these matters.

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Unbiblical Erasures

by Peter Stazen II

We live in a day and age of a lackadaisical attitude toward the visible church of Jesus Christ, even among professing Christians. In fact I nearly go into cardiac arrhythmia every time I hear the question, “Where does it say in the Bible that a Christian needs to be a member of a church?” Such a question in my mind shows complete ignorance of the Scripture and covenant theology. Church membership is important! Paul certainly saw the importance where, in spite of his bleeding back, he proceeded to have the Philippian jailer and his entire family, at midnight, baptized (a sign of admission into the visible church). Jay Adams says that identification with Christ’s church is important; without it one must be treated “as a heathen and publican.”¹ And yet, today we find professing Christians hopping from one church to another avoiding commitment. This independent, lack-of-membership commitment in the pews, I believe, reveals a weakness of the ordained officers who, over the years have failed to uphold a high view of the church and its membership.² It is no wonder that many a person sitting in the pew has this independent, non-covenantal, noncommittal attitude when it comes to membership in the visible church.

In such a day and age we need to be careful to define biblically who is to be considered a member of the church visible. The Scriptures speak of the church in at least two ways. There is the universal church, made up of believers in many denominations and countries. This is the meaning of the church in Matthew 16:18 and Ephesians 5:22-23. But the Scriptures also speak of individual congregations as churches. This was a group of believers in a certain geographical location who had come together to worship and serve Christ; officers were elected, and a form of government for the body existed.³

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church Form of Government (FOG), Chapter II-2, reflects this scriptural teaching: “The universal church visible consists of all those persons, in every nation, together with their children, who make profession of saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and promise submission to his commandments.” Importantly, FOG doesn’t conclude here but adds section 3, which states, “In accordance with the teaching of Scripture, the many members of this

church universal are to be organized in local and regional churches, confessing a common faith and submitting to a common form of government.” Yes, there is a universal visible church but this visible church is manifested locally. R.B. Kuiper states that “the visible church consists of all who are enrolled as church members...[whose] names appear on the registers of churches.”⁴ R.C. Sproul likewise states, “The visible church refers to the church as an organization, as an institution. It numbers those people whose names appear ‘visibly’ on the membership rolls of various churches.”⁵

In Presbyterian and Reformed churches the board of elders, called the session, is responsible to decide who shall be enrolled as members of the church. The session receives communicant members in one of three ways: by letter of transfer, reaffirmation of faith, or by confession of faith.⁶ It is the responsibility of elders to examine and admit believers to church membership which has its rights and privileges. These rights and privileges that nonmembers do not enjoy would include watchful care and spiritual oversight, instruction and government of the church, the sacraments and discipline.

All baptized persons, being members of the Church, are subject to its discipline and entitled to the benefits thereof. Church discipline is a privilege, and no communing or non-communing member of the church should be allowed to stray from the Scripture’s discipline.⁷ Where there is no discipline there is no godliness (I Timothy 4:7). Where there is no godliness there is sin and iniquity. As elders in Christ’s Church it behooves us to shepherd the flock of God among us, exercising oversight (I Peter 5:2). Discipline is not optional but a mark of the true church. Could it be that many members of our churches take no pride in their membership because elders have abdicated this mark and thus the church carries no more distinction than membership with a merchandise warehouse or a bowling league?

Both in its preaching and in its discipline the church must distinguish between believers and unbelievers. Adams says that “discipline is a primary means available for drawing a line between the church and the world, one of the chief ways of identifying God’s people.”⁸ The world does not

worship God. The world does not assemble together with fellow believers on the Lord's Day to meet with the living God. The world could not care less about Christ and His body, the church. The world is ambivalent about making and keeping vows to Jehovah. And thus the importance of discipline whereby the church authoritatively separates between the holy and the profane, even as in the preaching of the Word the wicked are doctrinally separated from the good.⁹

Presbyterian and Reformed books of discipline explicitly outline the steps to be followed in judicial discipline. Judicial discipline is concerned with the prevention and correction of offense, an offense being defined as anything in the doctrine or practice of a member of the church which is contrary to the Word of God. The purpose of judicial discipline is to vindicate the honor of Christ, to promote the purity of his church, and to reclaim the offender.¹⁰

In judicial discipline there are varying degrees of censures, with excommunication being the most severe form. Excommunication is resorted to only in cases of offenses aggravated by persistent impenitence. It consists in a solemn declaration by an ecclesiastical judicatory that the offender is no longer considered a member of the body of Christ.¹¹

By excommunication one is removed from the care and discipline of the Church of Jesus Christ. Note how the New Testament describes this action of the termination of one's membership in the visible organized church: "removal from the midst" (I Corinthians 5:2), "clean out the old leaven" (I Cor. 5:7), "remove from among yourselves" (I Cor. 5:13), "deliver such a one to Satan" (I Cor. 5:5), "delivered over to Satan" (I Timothy 1:20), and "treat as a heathen and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17). Excommunication excludes the unrepentant offender from the church. Removal is a serious matter not to be taken lightly or thought of merely as some therapeutic step. There is a grave danger to the unrepentant sinner who continues to exhibit contumacy.

Now I would like to think that the initiation of judicial process where a member is unrepentant ought to be fairly clear to sessions in cases involving sexual sins, gossip, slander, theft, drunkenness, etc., and that the censure of excommunication would be administered to those who remain unrepentant and hardened in their sin. But what are we to do with the member who stops attending church? How are we to deal with members who, over time, fall away and become inactive? Members who no longer take an interest in

the body of Christ? How are sessions to respond when a member drops a note saying, "I quit" or "Please remove my name from the rolls of the church"?

Some books of church order make provision for these precise cases. For instance, The Book of Discipline [BOD] of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church states,

When a member of a particular church, whether or not he be charged with an offense, informs the session that he does not desire to remain in the fellowship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and the efforts of the session to dissuade him from his course have failed, it shall erase his name from the roll and record the circumstances in its minutes, unless the session institutes or continues other disciplinary action against him.¹²

When a member, without adequate reason, persistently and over an extended period of time, absents himself from the stated services of the church, his name may be erased from the roll according to the following procedures. He shall be earnestly and personally dealt with by the session. If this effort fails, he shall be notified that at a meeting of the session not less than two months later his standing shall be reviewed. The session shall inform him of the time, date, and place of this meeting and invite him to show why his name should not be erased from the roll. If satisfactory reasons are not presented, the session shall erase his name from the roll, record the circumstances in its minutes, and send notification to him.¹³

In one sense it is propitious that the BOD advises the session to make contact with the delinquent member. Certainly some sessions are more zealous in seeking to persuade members to change their course of action. But note, when all else fails, the BOD gives the authorization to the session to erase the name from the roll and send notification of the session's action.

Now I ask you: what has the session done if they take action and erase as cited above? What are the implications of erasing one's name from the rolls of the church when the "erased" has no other church home where he holds membership?

Some elders erroneously conclude that such folks simply remain members of the universal visible church. But in light of what has been previously presented in this paper, such is not the case. The session, by erasing their names from the church rolls, removed them from the

visible church! They are now outside the visible body of Christ, outside the covenant community of believers. They have been removed from the midst.¹⁴

In reality this is precisely what occurs in such erasures. There is a misuse and misapplication of terms in some Presbyterian and Reformed books of church order. Erasure is a proper term when used in the right context. When clerks (of sessions) receive notification that one of our members has joined another church then the session erases his name from the rolls. When a member dies his name is erased from the rolls. When a man is ordained to the Gospel ministry and becomes a member of a regional church (presbytery), his name is erased from the roll of his home church. Unless there is a legitimate transfer of membership, erasure is tantamount to excommunication.

Saying “I quit” or requesting to be erased or “dropped” from the rolls of the church is serious business. When an individual unites with a church he is outwardly expressing his inward faith in Jesus Christ. He is, in essence, telling the world by his outward association with fellow believers that he is a part of the visible body of Christ. Vows are taken. A covenant is established. Conversely, if he withdraws himself completely from the visible body of Christ he is, in essence, telling the world that he is not willing to be part of the visible body of Christ. He is expressing, by his actions, that he is no longer willing to be under the authority that God has established on this earth to care for, shepherd, and watch over His people. He either is displaying an inconsistency in his faith or he is declaring that he never really possessed that faith.¹⁵ In either case he has “forsaken our own assembling together” (Hebrews 10:25) and is living contrary to the fourth commandment. How can a member unilaterally cast off the jurisdiction of the church at will without sinning against God and the church?¹⁶ How can one quit the Church without violating his covenant with it?¹⁷ He has forsaken, abandoned, and deserted the body of Christ. His once apparent credible confession of faith has now become incredible (unbelievable). Let’s be honest and not skirt the issue: he has apostatized from the faith.

Under such circumstances how can sessions possibly be content with a person’s “quiet withdrawal” by simply erasing his name from the rolls of the church? Whereas the censure of “excommunication forewarns of the future and final judgment of God upon the unrepentant person, a judgment which none can escape by quiet withdrawal,”¹⁸ yet, regrettably, many sessions accom-

modate the absentee member’s wishes. Why? Because this brand of erasure is non-confrontational. It is much easier and less burdensome than a trial which involves full process. Sessions are also prone to kid themselves when they entertain the notion that the negligence of worship attendance is a minor sin and is not to be categorized as heinous. A thorough reading of *The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards*, questions 108, 115-121, 143-145, 150 and 151 will squelch that notion. These catechetical answers concern the sins forbidden and duties required in the second, fourth, and ninth commandments, along with the several aggravations of such sins. I ask, how can we elders in good conscience, especially as we understand the teaching of Holy Writ concerning membership in the visible church, acquiesce and permit such erasures to occur with our blessings?

So then, what are sessions to do with those members who have apparently apostatized from the faith? Sessions have always had available to them the prerogative to use the full process as outlined in our books of church order. The biblical mandate on church discipline, as found in Matthew 18 and other places, consists in the five steps as outlined by Jay Adams.¹⁹ This mandate is elaborated upon in Presbyterian and Reformed books of church order. It involves contacts (personally and by letter) with the individual by session members, with exhortations to repent. If there is no godly response, the next step is to formulate charges with specifications, issuing a citation for the accused to appear, and then proceed with trial. The details involved in these books of church order concerning trials are to insure that things are done decently and in order.

But can one biblically be excommunicated from the visible church without “going full process,” that is, without conducting a trial? While some say no, I am inclined to think that the Bible certainly permits such. If we follow the steps as outlined by Adams (based on Matthew 18:15-17) then we could say that the current process of erasure as cited in the OPC Book of Discipline V:2-a-(5)²⁰ is sufficient to remove someone from the church. By the time the session gets involved in the process, we are already at the fourth step (telling it to the church). There has been, in essence, a public declaration of sin by those who forsook the assembly. By their inactivity they have shown their sin publicly. Therefore it is not improper for the church (as a government) to enter into the process. It must confront the sinner (which the Book of Discipline supports) by, first, “earnestly and personally” dealing with them, and secondly, by issuing notice to appear to give

reason why he should not be erased. Based on what is currently in the Book of Discipline he has two months to put together his “defense” (i.e., the reason for not having his name erased). There is probably nothing wrong with the current process, with the exception of the wording. It is not erasure but rather excommunication, the “removal from the midst” of the visible church of Jesus Christ.²¹

This writer knows of another NAPARC church where a denominational committee is currently studying this issue of unbiblical erasures. A session of that denomination presented a paper questioning the long-standing practice of such erasures and has proposed possible amendments to their book of church order.

I hope the reader can see and understand why I am very uncomfortable with the current language and misapplication of the word “erasure” in the above noted instances. The current language of erasure as cited in the OPC Book of Discipline V:2-a-(2), (3), (4), (5), and (6) is ambiguous and needs clarification.

- 1 □ Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 81, footnote.
- 2 There are numerous cases in which this manifests itself in Presbyterian and Reformed churches across our land. Many sessions serve the Lord’s Supper to individuals who are not members of the visible church. Some folks are received into membership without the session inquiring into previous affiliations or if the applicant is under any form of discipline. At times, requests for letters of transfer are ignored or at best delayed because “it is a bother” or considered “just paperwork.” Many sessions fail to request a letter of transfer. Some sessions authorize the baptism of infants whose parents are not communicant members of their congregation. Sessions often permit people to attend and involve themselves in nearly all the privileges of church membership for long periods of time without even approaching them to commit to the local body of believers. The list is virtually endless.
- 3 When we think of church membership, it is usually this latter sense of the word “church,” of which we are speaking. The New Testament clearly reveals that every professing Christian is to be a member of a local church (Matthew 18:15-17; Acts 2-5; 6; 20:28; Romans 12; I Corinthians 5; I Timothy 3:5; Hebrews 13:17; I Peter 5:3; III John 10; etc.).
- 4 R.B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 26.
- 5 R. C. Sproul, *The Symbol* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975), p. 137.

- 6 □ □ □ □ □ A letter of transfer may be received from another Presbyterian and Reformed church that substantially confesses the doctrines we believe (generally this means from another member of NAPARC). Reaffirmation of faith is when an individual has previously confessed faith in Christ but in a church whose doctrines or practices differ enough from that which we are not willing to endorse. Confession of faith is by an individual who has not previously been a communicant member of a church (for example, a baptized youth who wishes to become a communicant member or an adult convert).
- 7 *The Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America Part II, Chapter 27-2, 27-4.
- 8 Adams, p. 10.
- 9 *PCA Book of Church Order*, 27-4.
- 10 *The Standards of Government, Discipline and Worship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Book of Discipline*, Chapter I:3.
- 11 *Ibid.*, *Book of Discipline* [BOD], Chapt. VI:B-5.
- 12 *Ibid.*, BOD, Chapter V:2-a-(3). Chapter V is titled “Cases Without Full Process.”
- 13 *Ibid.*, BOD, V:2-a-(5).
- 14 Adams, p. 79 footnote.
- 15 A prolonged illness is a providential hindrance and would not be under consideration here.
- 16 Peter Stazen II, “*The Family Matters*,” *Ordained Servant*, Volume 3, No. 3.
- 17 Morton Smith, *Commentary on the PCA Book of Church Order* (Greenville: Greenville Seminary Press, nd), p. 46-7.
- 18 Daniel E. Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline* (Carlisle: *The Banner of Truth Trust*, 1978), p. 15.
- 19 Adams, p. 27ff.
- 20 *The Standards*, Chapter V:2-a-(5).
- 21 I appreciate OPC ruling elder Mike Diercks’ preliminary thoughts on this subject as it pertains to the OPC BOD.

We are grateful for another thought-provoking contribution from the Rev. Peter Stazen II. He currently serves as pastor of the Pilgrim Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Metamora, Michigan.

“Unlimited Atonement”

by

G. I. Williamson

For whom did Christ die? Was it for the elect only? Or was it for the whole world? That is the question. And strange as it may seem to us, the answer is that Jesus died for both. It is all a matter of proper understanding. And the central thing that we need to understand is the doctrine of union with Christ.

Those Jews who rejected Jesus did not object to a certain kind of doctrine of election. It was quite to their liking to think that God had elected Abraham and that they were his children. “We are Abraham’s offspring”, they boasted, “and have never yet been enslaved to any one.” (John 8:33). Reformed people, too, have made this mistake. They have made it when, for example, they have taken God’s covenant promise (Acts 2:39) as a kind of automatic thing. “If you are born to covenant parents,” they say, “and are baptized, and outwardly conform to the Church, then the clear presumption is that you are a regenerate person.” The doctrine of election, then, becomes a kind of natural possession. It is a kind of birthright that you have because you are covenant-born.

The whole teaching of the Word of God is diametrically opposed to this concept. That is why the words of Jesus were so offensive to the Jews.¹ For over against the common Jewish conception of the covenant, our Lord set the true conception. And the heart of this true conception is the doctrine of union with Christ.

We can illustrate this (the way Paul does in Romans 5) by comparing Jesus with Adam. As a matter of fact, we all have union with Adam by nature. Because we were, in some sense, one with Adam when he sinned, we also sinned in him and fell with him (Rom. 5:12). A person may not know this (such as one who has never heard the teaching of the Bible), or, a person may not like it (such as an unbelieving American who has). But it is true just the same. We are what we are by nature because we have (or, if we are

believers: had) union with Adam. And it is so with the second Adam, the Lord Jesus. For just as all who were in Adam sinned and fell in him, so all who are in Jesus Christ were dead and are risen (Rom. 6: 1-6).

The amazing thing about this union with Christ is that there is a sense in which it was already there even before we came into existence. For Paul says, “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). It was for this reason that Jesus prayed (on the night in which He was betrayed) for all those whom the Father had given Him (Jn. 17:9). He did not pray for all men, but only for these. And yet, at the same time, it is also true that we do not enjoy the fruits of this union with Christ until we receive Him as He is freely offered to us in the gospel. It is only when we repent of our sins, and put our trust in Him, that we actually possess the saving benefits of union with Christ.

It follows, then, that all who do embrace Jesus as He is offered in the gospel are persons for whom Christ died. And this takes us, at once, outside the confines of Jewish exclusivism. For the truth is that Jesus did not die for the Jews only (just as he did not die for all who are by nature, Jewish). No, as Jesus clearly said, He came down to give His flesh for the life of the world (Jn. 6:51) and not just the Jewish nation. And on both of these counts the teaching of Christ was offensive to the Jews. They wanted a covenant that guaranteed salvation to all Jews, and to them only (although they were willing to include others who would, in effect, become Jews!) But they did not want a covenant which included Gentiles on an equal footing, and which required that whether Jew or Gentile they must, to be saved, be in union with Jesus.

Now it has been a longstanding custom to call this the doctrine of “limited atonement.” But if ever there was a bad choice of terms, it is found in this traditional designation. It is my contention, to the contrary, that it is in the Reformed conception, and the Reformed conception alone, that justice is done to the teaching of Scripture. And

1. E.g. John 6:50-58

that teaching could better be described as the doctrine of the unlimited atonement. This is true because the atonement is one of two things: it is either (1) that Jesus died to make salvation possible for all men, or (2) that He died to make salvation certain for some.²

The first of these two propositions can be made to sound very appealing, and is certainly more popular, today, than the second. But is it true? It is to this that we now direct your attention as we ask one simple question.

If Jesus died only to make salvation possible for all, then it would not be the death of Christ alone that made the salvation of some (out of the 'all') an actual reality. And we would have to ask: "What is it, then, that makes a possible salvation become an actual salvation?" Well, the answer which has been given, again and again in the history of the Church, is that it is something man himself does. One man, of his own natural strength and ability, decides to reject Christ. Another, of the same strength and ability, decides to accept Christ. And it is this act—this decision—added to what Christ has done, that turns a possible salvation into an actual salvation. And this, as you can see, limits the atonement because it clearly says the atonement of Christ is limited to providing only a part of what man needs for salvation.

The Reformed doctrine, on the other hand, really ought to be called the doctrine of the *unlimited* atonement. By this, we mean that in the Reformed view, it is Christ's death—with nothing added to it at all—which is seen as the sole cause of man's salvation. It is unlimited because it saves to the uttermost all those for whom Christ made His atonement. The difference, be it observed, is not that Christ's atonement (on the one view) saves everyone, or (on the other view) only some. All Bible-believing Christians know from the infallible Word of God that only some men will be saved. The whole difference is simply concerned with whether the death of Christ is, or is not, limited in its power and effectiveness. Is it an atonement of limited power, which saves some men when they add their part to Christ's part? Or

2. There is, of course, a third possibility which has been suggested, namely, that Christ died to actually effect the salvation of all men without exception. This is so clearly contrary to the Scripture that we leave it entirely out of the picture.

is it an atonement of unlimited power which saves some men because that is precisely the effect that Christ intended?³

Jesus expressed the essential thing in this doctrine in precisely the way the Jews needed to hear it. He warned them that unless they had union with Him, in His sacrifice on the cross, they could have no part whatever in God's salvation (Jn. 6:53). If they were not willing to eat His flesh and drink His blood (which is equivalent to union with Christ), there could be no life in them. If they did have their pride obliterated and came to see Christ as their only hope, on the other hand, they would live forever.

The atonement of Christ is *particular* (or *definite*)—it was designed to effect the eternal salvation of God's elect people. But it is right here that we need to make one further observation. It is precisely because it is particular that it is also universal. It is, in a word, because it makes salvation certain for many, that it also has worldwide dimensions. For, astounding as it may seem, it is the world that will be saved. No, not every man in the world. But it will be the world as a whole—some (as John tells us) out of every tongue and tribe and nation, until there is at last a multitude that no man can number (Rev. 7:9). And remember: this is not a mere possibility; it is a certainty. For just as "through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one the many will be made righteous...that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5: 19, 21).

As Professor B. B. Warfield once put it: "There is no antinomy...in saying that Christ died for His people and that Christ died for the world. His people may be few today: the world will be His people tomorrow." And again, "it is only the Calvinist that has warrant to believe in the salvation whether of the individual or of the world. Both alike rest utterly on the sovereign grace of God. All other ground is shifting sand."

3. Jesus said: "I pray for *them*: I do *not* pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are yours. All Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them" (John 17:9,10).