

*When Not to Obey*  
Our obedience to civil government is not unqualified.

# WHEN NOT TO OBEY



*A ReVision Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe*

T . M . M O O R E

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

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## Welcome to *When Not to Obey*

Welcome to *When Not to Obey*, part 5 of a 5-part series on the Christian and civil government. Other titles in the series include:

*Two Swords*  
*God's Servant for Good*  
*The Limits of Politics*  
*Christians and Public Service*

Government is God's servant for good. Therefore, Christians should obey the civil government, and even seek opportunities to serve in the public square, as the Lord leads.

But governments are made up of sinful, fallible people, just like you and me. And, as we have seen, they can sometimes overstep the limits and overturn the standards for governing which God has set for them. This makes it especially important that Christians understand how their government works, and that they be vigilant and involved in using every lawful means to help government fulfill its God-given role.

But at times the only recourse we have when it comes to serving God rather than men is to disobey the civil government. Such times may be rare, but we need to understand when disobedience is called for and how to comport ourselves in the process. This is the focus of *When Not to Obey*.

Like the other studies in this series, *When Not to Obey* has been developed for individual or group use.

We are happy to provide this resource for your use at no charge. If you find these, or other resources of The Fellowship of Ailbe, helpful in your walk with and work for the Lord, please consider sending a gift to support this work and help us extend our outreach to others. You can donate at our website, [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org), or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

May the Lord bless you as you take up this study of the Lordship of Christ, and how He works to express that through the right working of civil government.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 When He is Good

*For he is God's minister to you for good.* Romans 13.4

### *Instituted by God*

As we have seen throughout the studies in this series, God has established civil governments to serve the people they govern according to His good purposes. Governments exist to restrain evil, so that justice and peace can flourish, and people can be secure and free to serve God according to their callings and stations in life.

Because human beings are sinful and prone to seek their own ends at anybody and everybody else's expense, governments serve to check that sinful propensity and constrain wickedness through just laws and the use of the sword. The passage from which our text is excerpted reads in full as follows: "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake" (Rom. 13.1-5).

We must obey civil government, therefore, and do everything we can to support it in its calling as a minister of God for good.

But governments are somewhat like the little girl with the little curl in the middle of her forehead. They can be a very, very good thing. Throughout the course of human history, we find many examples of civil governments doing very good things. In our own day, it's not difficult to demonstrate how the wisdom and love of God are visible in the work of civil governments; but when they go bad, they can be awful.

### *A necessary good*

Paul elsewhere teaches that Christians must pray for their government, because faithful prayers for all forms of civil government – helps to ensure that God's purposes of peace, justice, and human flourishing will obtain in society (1 Tim. 2.1, 2). Moreover, such prayer contributes to the creation of a civic environment which is conducive to the spread of the Gospel (1 Tim. 2.3, 4).

So when governments are good, when they work to preserve a just, free, peaceable, and God-honoring society, they are very, very good, indeed.

But in a day such as ours, when so much of what government does rubs a good many of us the wrong way, it's easy to believe that government is a necessary evil. The less we have to do with government, the better.

That, however, would be a wrong conclusion. According to Scripture, government is a necessary *good*, and when it is good, it is very good for all members of the society. Believers should actively support, promote, and celebrate all that is good about our government, and be faithful each day to hold our leaders up in prayer.

### *Submit – to a point*

Paul says – and Peter as well (1 Pet. 2.13-16) – that we should be submissive – obedient – to our government. By obeying good government we show that, as a people, Christians are committed to what is good and

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wholesome for the whole of our society, and we silence the wranglings and ragings of our detractors by our manifest commitment to the good of our neighbors.

But, just like that little girl with the little curl, the same governments that can be very, very good, can also be very, very bad. And when they are, they are indeed horrid. They can be so bad, in fact, that it is not difficult to demonstrate not only that government has veered from the path of goodness God intends for it, but that it is actually standing in the way of God's goodness and opposing His divine economy by its policies and laws.

Are Christians supposed to obey government, even when it is bad? When its actions fly in the face of God's good and perfect will? When it flouts the Law of God, jeopardizes the peace of its citizens, or attacks those who disagree with its policies in unlawful ways?

The answer, of course, is, No. When government is horrid, Christians not only are *not* obligated to obey, they *must not* obey. But under what circumstances can we know that this is the appropriate response?

This will be the focus of our studies in this series.

### *For reflection*

1. Cite some examples of ways civil government today is serving as God's minister for good in our society.
2. Can you think of any examples from Scripture in which civil government openly and defiantly opposed God's people and plan? How did God's people react at such times?
3. Would you be prepared to oppose, and even to disobey, civil government if it were shown to be opposing the divine economy and plan? Why or why not?

*Next steps: What might be some signs that civil government is veering from the path God has marked out for it? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.*

*Prayer:*

## 2 Whom to Fear

*But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive... Therefore God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very mighty. And so it was, because the midwives feared God, that He provided households for them. Exodus 1.17, 20, 21*

### *The temptation of political power*

Because governments are comprised of sinful people, even though they have been instituted by God to pursue His good purposes among men, it shouldn't surprise us when, from time to time, governments turn very, very bad and become horrid.

The temptation to use political power in unjust ways for one's own ends is a very powerful temptation, indeed. When the Founders of this country crafted our form of government, they built in a series of checks and balances between the various entities of our government – federal and state – so that this temptation could be minimized by lawful means. This system of checks and balances has served our country very well for more than 230 years.

But no system of checks and balances ever devised by men has *always* been able to keep government from overstepping its bounds, betraying its commission, and flouting the will and purposes of God. And in some places such checks and balances do not exist at all. Exhibit 1: Egypt in the days of Moses.

### *Unchecked power*

The king of Egypt, or Pharaoh, in the days of Moses had no such system of checks and balances. Indeed, in the minds of many, Pharaoh was, if not a deity, at least as close to one as any human could ever be. He was therefore free to do whatever he felt was needed. In the days of Joseph, this turned out to be a very good thing, as Pharaoh gave God's servant a free hand to follow the Lord's will for saving not just a nation but an entire region.

But that same unchecked power that could work for good could also be wielded for evil. In Exodus 1, alarmed at the continuing growth of the population of Hebrews in his midst, Pharaoh determined that he needed to take drastic measures against what he feared might become a fifth column of resistance in the event of a foreign war.

The way, he reasoned, to reduce the population of Hebrews without some big public scandal – such as mass murder – was simple: prevent male children from being born. If Hebrew women would bear only female children, the population would be significantly reduced in a very short while, and the king's fears would be relaxed.

However, since Hebrew women were not likely to produce only female children – even if they could have made that choice – Pharaoh decided to take matters into his own hands. He instructed the Hebrew midwives, among them two, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill any male children who were born and to preserve only the little girls alive. The Law of God had not been given at this time; yet the works of the Law were so deeply etched in the hearts of those Hebrew midwives, going all the way back to the days of Noah (Gen. 9.5-7), that they determined they could not obey this evil mandate.

### *The fear of God*

Rather than kill the male children, therefore, the Hebrew midwives kept them alive, and then *lied* to the king about their actions when called to account (vv. 18, 19).

Why did they do this? Because they feared God more than they feared the king of Egypt. The king of Egypt, they knew, could put them to death for disobeying his order. But God could destroy their souls and bodies in hell if they were to go along with this diabolical scheme of the king of Egypt.

God, however, commended their actions and blessed them accordingly.

So here is the first principle to guide Christians in considering the question of when *not* to obey civil government: Whenever government, at any level, and by any means, tries to *require* disobedience to God's Law, that government has overstepped its bounds, making itself god instead of God Who ordained it. Such a government *must not be obeyed regarding the specific point at issue*.

This may not have immediate application in our situation; however, we have seen the disastrous effects of such policies in China, where the one-child mandate – which has now been withdrawn – created social problems on an unforeseen and enormous scale.

When governments act in ways that deliberately oppose the will of God, they are setting their people up for horrid consequences, and they must not be obeyed.

*For reflection*

1. The Hebrew midwives not only disobeyed, but they lied about their actions to the civil authorities. And still, God blessed them. Explain.
2. What was the difference between the *Roe v Wade* ruling of 1973 and the “one-child” policy of the Chinese government? Are either of these grounds for disobedience? Explain.
3. Does knowing that God will bless us when we fear Him and disobey government mean that He will always keep us from harm at the hands of civil government? Explain.

*Next steps: Can you see any ways that civil government today is “pushing the envelope” in trying to make its citizens obey it rather than God? How should the Christian community respond in such situations? Do you pray for the people in civil government, following Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 2.1-8?*

*Prayer:*



### 3 Whom to Worship

*“If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.” Daniel 3.17, 18*

#### *Ruler worship*

Sometimes people who gain political power can become confused about the purposes and limits of that power. Or they simply seize whatever opportunity they can to abuse that power for their own ends. Either way, governments can sometimes pose as the *ultimate* authorities for the people they govern, and whenever this happens, it should send a signal to believers that a serious boundary has been transgressed.

As we have seen, sinful rulers can easily begin to think that they must wield their power in what would, if done overtly, be easily seen to be unjust ways, in order to further their own ends. So rather than make a big public show of violating conscience and the moral law, they do it under the radar, where (they hope) their mendacity will not be visible to the population.

Pharaoh sought to exercise his power through the Hebrew midwives. Other governments might not feel the need to be so stealthy, or they might bury their abuses and usurpations in legal language, hidden in the thick verbiage of legislation or regulations promulgated ostensibly for the good of the governed.

Still other rulers are insecure or simply cruel, and need to be continually reinforced with the idea that their people love them. So it was, apparently, with Nebuchadnezzar. He ruled the most powerful empire in the known world in his day, yet it wasn't enough for this super-duper-egomaniac of a king.

Nebuchadnezzar wanted not just the *subservience* of his people; he wanted their *obeisance*, that is, their *worship*. So, in order to accomplish this, he had a huge statue of gold prepared, about 90 feet tall. And he prepared a schedule for all the people of the land to worship the image – which was probably of Nebuchadnezzar himself – whenever the king commanded.

#### *Resisting the civil authority*

In order to make sure that this would happen on cue, Nebuchadnezzar first gathered all his local and regional administrators, and required them to show proper obeisance to the image. This was a very shrewd move; by forcing his immediate underlings to worship, on penalty of death, he hoped to ensure that they would force the people under them to worship, or suffer the fiery furnace right along with them.

The problem arose, however, when three of Nebuchadnezzar's chief officials refused to go along with the program. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the king was told, “have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up” (v. 12). Nebuchadnezzar became furious and demanded that the young men appear before him. “*Is it true,*” he inquired, “*that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up?*” He was astonished, to say the least. Hadn't they gotten the memo? Didn't they know about the fiery furnace? Did they think he was someone to be trifled with?

#### *Worship God only*

But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew the situation full well; they determined that they *must not obey* the king in this matter, and were willing to face the consequences of their disobedience.

As we know, they were rescued, and Nebuchadnezzar was impressed and moved a little closer to worshipping

God Himself. A second principle emerges for when it is right for a Christian not to obey civil government: Whenever civil government tries to *compel loyalty to itself even above loyalty to God*, it must be resisted.

Christians know that we must worship God and Him only, that all our ultimate obedience and devotion are due to the Lord of heaven and earth, and to no one or anything else. When governments try to require loyalty oaths, pledges of unqualified obedience, or other kinds of commitments of its people's ultimate devotion, they must be resisted. The American Pledge of Allegiance might at first seem to be just such a protocol to be resisted. However, the Pledge includes the phrase, "under God," as a qualifying factor in our allegiance. We can gladly and eagerly take such a pledge, since doing so affords a public opportunity of reminding ourselves and others where our ultimately loyalty lies.

Like Daniel's three friends, the first Christians refused to acknowledge Caesar's claim on their ultimate loyalty. Commanded to sign a written oath declaring the deity of Caesar, many, if not most, of them would not obey. Similarly, the American Founding Fathers detailed the abuses of the English king, whom they regarded as usurping God-given rights, in declaring their independence from his authority and rule.

We may not be required to sign a paper declaring that we worship our government above God, but we must be ever vigilant against any attempts on the part of civil magistrates to usurp our ultimate allegiance to Him Who has appointed *them* as servants for our good.

*For reflection*

1. Secular governments don't believe in God. So does this mean we don't need to worry about their usurping the place of God in our worship? Explain.
2. Governments aren't always so brazen about trying to make themselves the ultimate authority in the lives of those they govern. They can, in the name of the public weal, create arenas where conversation about God is simply *omitted* or even *forbidden*, and then all but require their citizens to participate in such arenas. Can you think of any examples of this in our own nation?
3. What might be some *lawful* lines of protesting or redressing government abuse, before you turn to civil disobedience?

*Next steps: Is this problem of government usurping the place of God a matter of such concern that churches should teach their people how to recognize and respond to such a situation? Talk with a church leader about this question.*

*Prayer:*

## 4 When to Worship

*Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days. Daniel 6.10*

### *Control freaks*

Governments like to control things, have you noticed?

That old temptation to abuse political power has many guises. With Darius we see a new example of a government going bad and acting horribly. Darius may have been a very powerful man and a skilled military leader; but he was apparently a few cars short of a full train. He was easily flattered by his lackeys and, thus, induced to take an action that even he would later recognize as completely foolish.

Darius' fellow Persians, who were appointed to administer the realm he had taken over from the Babylonian king, didn't like the fact that Daniel was kept on in an influential role. He wasn't "one of them" after all, and he should not have been allowed more power than they, or, so these political appointees reasoned.

How to get rid of Daniel? They came up with a terrific scheme: Encourage the king of Persia to take charge of all religious exercises and to determine when and, probably, where anybody in his realm could pray to their god. That seemed reasonable to Darius, as, doubtless, it would to any civil government that was determined to aggrandize as much power as possible to itself.

The Persians were more cosmopolitan than the Babylonians, as the Romans after them would be. They didn't mind if captive peoples worshiped their own deities, as long as they were obedient to the rulers of the Persian Empire. So the problem wasn't that Daniel refused to give up his religion for that of his new ruler. The problem was that Daniel would not be *ruled* in his religious practices by any government mandate.

### *Not thirty days, not one!*

Darius was manipulated by his underlings to sign a law of the Persians – which, once signed, could not be revoked, but only overridden by a new law. That law said, in effect, that only the king of Persia could authorize people to pray (vv. 6-9). Granted, this was only for a 30-day period, but to Darius it would have meant that he had power to make such determinations any time, for any length of time.

For his jealous underlings, who knew Daniel very well, it would be just enough time to accomplish their wicked purposes.

So it is significant, as our text tells us, that as soon as Daniel knew that the law had been put into effect, he went right back to his regular practice of praying three times a day, in full public view, kneeling in the window of his apartment and facing toward Jerusalem.

### *A higher Authority*

Daniel took his marching orders about spiritual matters from a higher Authority than King Darius. Like great saints in both Testaments, he understood that praying at least three times a day is part of what we owe to God, giving him thanks and praise, as well as bringing our petitions to Him in prayer. He would not be told by the civil magistrate either *whom* he should pray to or *when* he could pray, or, for that matter *what* he could include in his prayers.

So here is a third principle for when it is *right*, indeed, *essential*, for believers in Christ not to obey civil

government: Whenever the magistrate tries to *control the practice of religion* in a way contrary to what God has commanded, Christians must be willing to disobey.

And this strikes us right here at home, because we are commanded to pray at all times, without ceasing, and in every place. Any government mandate that tries to forbid or restrict such lawful prayers on the part of Christians must be opposed, and at times, publicly.

In the same way, civil government must not be allowed to dictate or control the content of Christian preaching and teaching. For now, we don't worry too much about this. But "hate speech" legislation and court rulings could soon infringe on the freedom of Christians to teach the Bible openly. Indeed, already preachers and other Christian teachers may feel constrained as to what they can teach out of fear of jeopardizing the tax-exempt status of their church or organization.

But it is not the province of civil government to dictate or regulate the terms, times, or teachings of worship. This does not mean that *any and all* worship is legitimate; rather, it simply insists that all forms of lawful worship should be as directed under the guidance and regulation of God's Word, and not the whims of magistrates.

*For reflection*

1. Some might think that government has *no* authority to regulate worship. Is this true? Why or why not?
2. In what ways does a church's tax-exempt status potentially jeopardize its freedom of worship and instruction? How should a church deal with this?
3. Is it ever proper for a Christian to *refrain* from public prayer or preaching? Why or why not? What alternatives exist for believers "always to pray" (Lk. 18.1) without provoking or offending either the people around us or the civil magistrate?

*Next steps: Government must not seek to regulate Christian worship. Only Scripture can do that. How confident are you that the worship in your church is regulated by Scripture? If it's not regulated by Scripture, then what does regulate your church's worship? Talk with a church leader about these questions.*

*Prayer:*

## 5 When to Speak

*But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men." Acts 5.29*

### *The threat of the Gospel*

Political leaders can sometimes find religion to be a thorny issue. We have seen this throughout history, when civil magistrates have lashed out against Christians in an effort to interrupt or cease the spread of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The Romans unleashed ten waves of violent persecution against the Church between the years 100 and 314, only to fall ultimately under the irresistible power of the Gospel.

The local ruler on the Hebridean island of Eigg slaughtered Donan and his fifty companions early in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, hoping to extirpate the Gospel from her land. She did not.

The Medici's hanged and burned Savonarola; his reforms went ahead anyway. Luther was put under the ban, and a contract issued on his life; the Gospel spread like wildfire. Seventy-two thousand Huguenot Christians were murdered on a single day in 1572, but the Gospel kept going on. The Church came under severe persecution in the Soviet Union; now only one of these entities remains.

When civil governments determine that the Gospel is a threat because its claims take priority over those of the powers-that-be, they can be very, very bad, indeed, downright horrid, in seeking to suppress, if not eradicate altogether, the presence of the Gospel from their jurisdiction.

Yet such policies have never worked to stop the spread of the faith, and they never will.

### *The mission of the Church*

The reason is simple: Just like Peter, John, and the rest of the first Christians, believers understand that God, not government, is to be obeyed when it comes to the mission of the Church and the progress of the Kingdom.

When the local authorities, acting with Rome's nod, tried to silence the spread of the Gospel in Jerusalem, they took a direct but progressive route. In Acts 4 they simply commanded the apostles to stop preaching the Name of Jesus Christ under threat of punishment (Acts 4.17-21). But the apostles were unfazed; they listened politely but let the authorities know, in no uncertain terms, that they must obey the Word of the Lord: "But Peter and John answered and said to them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard'" (Acts 4.19, 20).

### *Overstepping*

So why were the rulers so surprised, in Acts 5, to find that the apostles had not obeyed their command? "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" (Acts 5.28)

Well, that's what they'd said they were going to do. Peter and the apostles answered this astonished accusation by saying, "We ought to obey God rather than men." Remember that Peter is the one, with Paul, who said we must obey the civil authorities (1 Pet. 2.13-16). That's true, as long as government is serving within the parameters outlined in God's Word. But the rules of engagement change when government oversteps its bounds as, in this case, by trying to impede, obstruct, or bring to a halt the work of the Church and the Kingdom of God.

## *When Not to Obey*

So here is the fourth principle guiding us when *not* to obey civil governments: Whenever government in any way tries to *obstruct the progress of the Gospel or suppress the work of the Church*, it *must be* disobeyed.

We do not yet face such a threat in this country. However, elsewhere the danger is real, and the opposition to the Gospel can be violent. Christians in Marxist and Muslim lands daily face the threat of physical harm because of their refusal to desist from worshiping God and propagating the Gospel. They understand that they must obey God rather than men, and they're willing to pay the price such obedience requires.

Governments in free and democratic countries are not so overt in the ways they may try to impede the progress of the Gospel. But by overburdening Christian organizations with regulations and other paperwork, refusing access for the Gospel to such public venues as the nation's schools, and threatening to control and curtail the content of Christian preaching and teaching, even democratic governments can overstep the bounds of their authority and create obstacles for the progress of the Gospel.

It is incumbent on believers in Christ, whenever we are confronted with these challenges, to stand firm like the Apostles and insist that we must obey God and not men – come what may.

### *For reflection*

1. Suggest some ways believers might keep apprised of government actions that may infringe or threaten their liberty.
2. What should be the role of local church leaders in helping their people in this area?
3. What might be some of the consequences of choosing to obey God rather than men?

*Next steps: Talk with some of your fellow believers about how you might help Christians in other countries whose freedoms are under assault. See if you can get your church to adopt some specific, ongoing action on behalf of these fellow believers.*

*Prayer:*

## 6 Little Disruptions

*When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!"* John 2.15, 16

*A house of prayer, not commerce*

So much for gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

What's going on here? Jesus recognized that, under authority from religious and civil rulers, merchants of various kinds had set up shop in the temple precincts, ostensibly to facilitate worship on the part of people who had come from afar or from other lands. If they had to come a long way, it would not be convenient to bring their sacrifice with them. Why not just buy one at the temple, you know, right before you go in? And if you'd come from another province and didn't bring your credit card or have any local currency, why, they could exchange your money for you so you could purchase your sacrifice with local coin.

All this, of course, for a small fee.

And all the while, the money changed hands and lined the pockets of unscrupulous merchants and religious leaders who preyed on the needs of pious travelers *in the very house of God itself*.

This was not why the temple had been constructed. The temple was God's dwelling-place in the midst of His people, the holiest site of all Israel, and the place where people should expect to encounter the glory of God and not the greed of their neighbors. But these men had licenses to run their kiosks, and they were rendering a public service!

No matter, Jesus reasoned; they had to go.

*Keeping an eye on government*

Now in the grand scheme of Roman and Jewish political concerns, Jesus' thrashing the money-changers was a minor episode, even something perhaps to joke and laugh about over a lavish dinner. A little comic relief and come-uppance for the money-grubbers in the midst.

Undoubtedly, as soon as Jesus left, these merchants simply set up shop once again. In fact, we know they did, because Jesus drove them out a second time, at the end of His public ministry (Mk. 11.15-19). But the outcome of this situation could have been something much more serious. The law could have been enforced against Jesus, here at the very beginning of His ministry. But Jesus, appealing to what everybody knew was a truth no one could deny, stiff-armed any thought about bringing charges against Him and went on with His ministry.

So what's the principle here to guide us in when not to obey the powers-that-be? It's this: Whenever government seeks to *intrude*, or authorizes its agents to *intrude*, on the sacred purposes and grounds of the Church, believers must be ready *not* to obey what government requires.

This is tricky, because many government regulations – such as laws about zoning, handicapped access, building codes, and so forth – while they can seem burdensome to follow, are actually beneficial to the Church and its ministry.

*A warning to ministers*

But such is not always the case. Ministers should not be naïve concerning how influential they can be on the people entrusted to their care. Church members look to their pastors and leaders to help them understand how to walk the life of faith. What ministers and teachers preach and teach can have powerful effects on how the people in the pews think about what it means to follow Jesus.

At the same time, what they *omit to preach* also affects the followers of Christ. If church leaders don't preach and teach the whole counsel of God to the people, whatever we omit, the people will reckon, must not be all that important.

And if we fail to teach God's people the proper ways of relating to civil government, then they will believe that Scripture has nothing to say about this subject, and we all just have to make the most of this relationship as best we can.

Pray, therefore, for the preachers of this nation. Pray that they will have courage, like that "Black Brigade" of colonial ministers in the days leading up to the Revolution, who instructed the people of God in their day in the Biblical teaching concerning political matters of the day. Their sermons disrupted the status quo by challenging a corrupt government and a complacent people with their duty to God in the public square.

Perhaps their teaching could make a powerful contribution toward helping Christians fulfill their responsibility for helping government live within its God-appointed bounds.

*For reflection*

1. When was the last time your church offered any instruction in a Biblical view of government? What do you remember from that teaching?
2. Do you think this is a topic Christians should be more aware of? Why or why not?
3. What are the likely consequences of Christians and their leaders turning a blind eye to the Biblical teaching about government and our responsibility toward it?

*Next steps: Suggest to your pastor that this might be a good time for a series of sermons or other teaching on the Biblical view of government. Offer to provide your pastor with this and other studies in this series to help with preparation.*

*Prayer:*



## 7 Fully Aware of the Consequences

*And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. Acts 5.40, 41*

### *The limits of civil government*

In this series we have looked at some of the godly men and women in Scripture who, for one reason or another, disobeyed the civil authorities and received the blessing of God. We've seen that the time can come, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, when it is necessary to stand up to the authority of civil government and refuse to obey. The Hebrew midwives, Daniel's three friends, the Apostles, and our Lord Jesus Himself made it very clear that God is the believer's final authority, and whenever government tries to take His place, government must be challenged, even, if necessary, by disobedience.

We could have looked at many more examples – Rahab, for instance, who deceived her rulers by hiding the Hebrew spies; Jonathan who scoffed at his father's foolish order and ate some honey anyway; the prophet Elijah, who continually exasperated Ahab and his wicked queen; Esther, as she made bold to appear before the Persian king; the prophets as they stood up to corrupt kings and rulers; John the Baptist confronting Herod, Paul before the Jewish authorities, and even the Lord Jesus Himself, defying religious and civil authorities alike.

The point is simply for us to remember that the powers-that-be in this temporal realm are neither absolute nor final. They do not govern by divine *right* but by divine *mandate*. And they must not be allowed to usurp the place of God or threaten the progress of His Kingdom. At the end of the day believers must obey Christ and not allow government in any way to assume the place of God or King Jesus in our lives and ministries.

Presently in this country we're not under much threat of this; however, if you listen carefully, you can hear the thunder rumbling just over the horizon. Government regulators are probing areas where they may thwart Christian conviction and replace Kingdom values and practices with secular priorities. The days may soon be at hand when Christians will have to determine that, for the sake of the Gospel and the honor of Christ, even our own government, which we love and would die for if need be, must be disobeyed.

### *Know the consequences*

At the same time, we must bear in mind that, while civil governments are neither absolute nor final, they do wield power, which they can wield, if they choose to do so, against those who oppose their policies and mandates. Ask John the Baptist. Ask the Apostles. Ask the martyrs of the early Church. Ask the pioneers of the civil rights movement. Ask Jesus Himself.

So we need to prepare ourselves, and church leaders need to prepare their members, for the possibility of disobeying the civil magistrate when necessary – and *only* when necessary, when all other recourse has been exhausted, and *only* with respect to the particular issue of offense.

But we also need to prepare to suffer the consequences of how the powers-that-be may respond. Here we need a strong consensus among Christians from all sectors of the Body of Christ that we will stand together and stand by one another in working to ensure that government fulfills its mandate from the Lord to be a minister for good, even if it means we must disobey the government at times.

*While there is time*

The success of the civil rights movement in this country was largely dependent on the willingness of thousands of courageous men and women, many of them staunch followers of Jesus Christ, to go to jail. Civil rights leaders and those who joined them in the movement understood the consequences of civil disobedience, and they exhorted the members of their movement to take to the streets, face the police dogs and hoses, aid and encourage and assist one another, and if necessary, refuse to obey unjust laws – and they did.

It's one thing to make up our minds that we will disobey unjust governments on issues where they cross the line and offend against the honor of God and the moral law. It's another thing to be ready to submit to the consequences of resisting a civil power. Let us prayerfully consider and determine that we will be ready, should the time come, for both.

And, in the meantime, while there's *still* time, let us work diligently and lawfully to guide and shape our good government to follow the ways of God and the moral law, so that we make civil disobedience unnecessary. Civil government can be a very good thing, but only if people who know the ways of goodness stay involved, remain vigilant, and demonstrate – both by their responsible involvement and their willingness to disobey – that they are determined to keep government *under* God, rather than the other way around.

*For reflection*

1. Do you think it's realistic to expect Christians to disobey civil government, given the kinds of consequences that might ensue? Why or why not?
2. How serious a matter is it that Christians understand and, to whatever extent they can, participate in the workings of civil government? Why?
3. How about you: Are you prepared to stand up against civil government when it abuses its power and stands in the place of God or the progress of His Kingdom? What might that require of you?

*Next steps: Share what you've learned from this series with some Christian friends. Make copies of the PDF of this series and give it to some of your friends, urging them to read it through carefully.*

*Prayer:*

*When Not to Obey*

*Questions for discussion*

1. What reasons might believers have for disobeying civil government? What forms might that disobedience take?
2. Believers should not go out of their way to disobey civil government. At the same time, they should not avoid disobedience when it's called for. Explain.
3. What are some areas where Christians might expect civil government to oppose the teaching of Scripture and suppress Christian instruction or practice? What should believers be doing now to preclude such actions?
4. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study about helping to ensure that civil government fulfills its God-given mandate?
5. How are you planning to incorporate that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

*Prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org) to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship to help us extend our ministry and resources to others. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.