

WHEN THE ESTABLISHMENT IS WRONG

by Ray C. Stedman

We last left our heroes, Peter and John, hailed into court before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish rulers of Jerusalem. With them was the former lame man who had been made whole. Peter had said to him, "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I unto you; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" {cf, Acts 3:6}. Peter and John had been arrested because they had used the occasion to preach Jesus and the resurrection. It is important to notice that they did not use the occasion to begin a divine healing service. They did not ask the people to bring the sick and lame for them to heal. They did what God had intended done on that occasion, to preach through Jesus and the resurrection the ultimate healing of the inner hurt of man by the power of a new and risen life.

This threatening message (threatening in the eyes of the Jewish rulers) caused them to send authorities to arrest them and bring them before the Jewish court. There Peter boldly charged these men with the death of Jesus and declared to them a magnificent fact. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved," {Acts 4:12 RSV}. No other savior has ever been provided for men anywhere in the world, in any age or time, than Jesus. That is the great message Peter preached.

Now Dr. Luke takes up the account, beginning with verse thirteen of chapter four:

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus. But seeing the man that had been healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred with one another, saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is manifest to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it." {Acts 4:13-16 RSV}

This is a remarkable picture of the perversity of human hearts. I am sure these men, high priests, rulers of the city, would have prided themselves on being logical, reasonable, consistent men, acting on the basis of facts. We always think of ourselves this way. But this account makes very clear that they were utterly self-deceived. Though they thought they were acting from reason, they were actually operating contrary to reason.

Note how Dr. Luke develops this to reveal their utter inconsistency. He points out that they first noted an unexpected boldness in Peter and John, a note of authority in their voice, a poise, a confidence, an assurance that was very evident to these rulers who were not used to having men stand so calmly and appear so untroubled in their presence. They normally associated this kind of authority with the results of having been to school, having been trained, educated, skilled. Yet they also noted from the dress of the apostles that these were untrained, common men. In the language of the New English Bible, they were "untrained laymen" {Acts 4:13 NEB}, and these Jewish rulers were at a loss to understand this. How could these uneducated, common men have such poise and confidence? The conclusion they came to is most remarkable. Their own explanation was that these men had been with Jesus.

These Jewish rulers had had difficulty with Jesus. They had noted that whenever they had anything to do with Jesus, he evidenced a remarkable poise; nothing they said or did to him ever seemed to trouble him. Here were men who were reflecting the same spirit. They had doubtless become aware of the fact that anyone who had anything to do with Jesus for very long began to act differently -- he became a different person, and manifested an obvious confidence, an air of boldness and quiet authority. These Jewish rulers concluded therefore that these men had been with Jesus.

The second thing they noticed, which Dr. Luke brings out, was the continuous evidence of the man made

whole. The former lame man was standing there before them, along with Peter and John. Clearly, the rulers could not find charges to bring against them. It is evident that no crime had been committed; it is no crime to heal a sick man. A good deed had been done, and they could not deny it. They were, therefore, at a loss to know what to do with these men, what charge they could bring against them.

The third point Dr. Luke records is that they admitted to themselves, after the apostles had been sent out, that the nature of this act of healing was a sign. These men were acquainted with the meaning and value of signs. They were the rulers of a nation which had a unique relationship to God, a relationship which, throughout the course of their history, had been characterized by the giving of signs. God had frequently manifested his presence in an unmistakable manner and confirmed his message by accompanying signs. As long as the gospel was being proclaimed largely to Jews there was an appearance of signs, wonders, and miracles, because this people, throughout their history, had been dealt with by God in this manner. These men admit that this is a sign, and it is a sign which they knew was manifest to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the nature of which they cannot deny. Now the reasonable, logical, sensible reaction to that kind of evidence would be to acknowledge the sign as from God and support these men in their cause. But notice their conclusion,

"But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to any one in this name." So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. {Acts 4:17-18 RSV}

This was exactly contrary to the evidence they had received.

But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people; for all men praised God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old. {Acts 4:19-22 RSV}

Now the inconsistency of these Jewish rulers led to what was basically an illegal act. They were the representatives of God to this nation and as such they were ostensibly committed to doing the will and purpose of God. Yet here, in spite of the evidence they had received of what God wanted done, they directly opposed the will and word of God, and forbade these apostles to speak in the name of Jesus. The disciples, very wisely and courteously, declined to obey this command. They pointed out that they had no choice, they "cannot but speak the things they have seen and heard." The message they declared was so challenging, so transforming in its implications, both to the nation and to the world, that they cannot be silent and still be true to their relationship to God. It was a message desperately needed, so powerful in its implications and its effect that they cannot, out of sheer humanity, maintain silence. They therefore respectfully declined to obey what these rulers commanded. The priests can only bluster and threaten them because they feared the people, for the apostles had the support of the populace.

At this point the whole question of civil disobedience comes into view. Here is a clear case of it. These apostles were forbidden by the properly constituted authorities (the establishment, we would call them), to preach in the name of Jesus. The apostles told them to their faces that they would not obey the rule. This incident had been used through the centuries since, and especially in our own day, to justify many activities such as racial strife, draft evasion, violent demonstration, boycotts, strikes, etc. We cannot read this account without the question being raised, and quite properly: Is it right for a Christian to disobey a law because of a conscientious scruple? The clear answer of this account is, "Yes!" There are times when it is necessary, when it is right to disobey properly constituted authority. The establishment can be wrong as well as right.

But it is important also to notice from this account that civil disobedience occurs here only because the conscience of these men rested directly on a clear and unmistakable word of God which contravened the human law. That is most important to notice. The issue is so clear here that Peter actually calls on the rulers to be the judges as to what the apostles should do. He says, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge." You are religious men, he implies, you know which is the higher authority. This issue is so clear that we must choose between one or the other; you tell us, which should we

obey, God or you? God or man? The matter was so clear that these authorities cannot say a word. In the face of the evidence, the only thing they could say was, "Obey God rather than us." But they do not want to say that so the only alternative is to threaten and bluster and try to maintain control by the threat of force. They feared the people who were convinced that this was a remarkable sign from God.

Here then are the biblical grounds for civil disobedience. The Scriptures are very clear that governments are given by God. Romans 13:1-7 makes that unmistakable. Paul says there that government authorities are the servants of God. It is instructive to note that the emperor on the throne when Paul wrote those words was none other than Nero, a wicked, vile, and godless man, and one of the worst emperors the Roman empire ever had. Yet Paul could write that the governing authorities were the servants of God and those who resist them resist what God has ordained. He acknowledges that governments have certain powers, derived not from the people but from God -- the power to tax, the power to keep law and order, the power to punish evil-doing, even to the point of death. The Scriptures make perfectly clear that all this is right and ordained of God, and believers are exhorted to obey the authorities.

From this we can conclude that the human conscience, operating alone, unsupported by a word of revelation, is not enough grounds to disobey the law. The law of man, even bad law, is superior to conscience unless that conscience rests upon a direct word of God. That is what this account makes clear.

Conscience is not intended to tell us right from wrong. Consciences can be wrong as well as right. In fact, apart from the help of revealed truth, everyone's conscience would be wrong and would lead us all astray. Let me share a quotation from a very clear-thinking writer, H. C. Trumbull,

Conscience is not given to a man to instruct him in the right, but to prompt him to choose the right instead of the wrong when he is instructed as to what is right. It tells a man that he ought to do right, but does not tell him what is right. And if a man has made up his mind that a certain wrong course is the right one, the more he follows his conscience the more hopeless he is as a wrongdoer. One is pretty far gone in an evil way when he serves the devil conscientiously.

The clear instruction of Scripture is that conscience is not to be followed unless it is based upon the Word of God, a clear and unmistakable command of God. When the issue is in doubt, then the law is superior to conscience. It is only when there is a clear-cut case of conflict between the word and will of God, and the word and will of man (as in this case) that conscience is superior to law.

But notice now the action of the apostles, and where it is they go for redress and support:

When they were released they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit,

**'Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth set themselves in array,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed' --**

for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy palm had predestined to take place." {Acts 4:23-28 RSV}

These apostles did not go out to organize a revolutionary committee to overthrow the Sanhedrin. They did not even try to arouse a popular march or demonstration. The clear evidence of this passage is that they had popular support. The people were behind them, and the high priests were afraid because the people supported the apostles. But the apostles do not rely for even one minute upon political or popular pressure. They cast themselves upon the unique resource of the church in any age, which, when it forgets it, becomes nothing more than an instrument of distortion. They cast themselves wholly upon the sovereign power of God at work

in history. That is the greatest force to alter a power structure that the world has ever seen. It has been ignored by the church many times and thus Christians have frittered away their efforts in relatively useless activities which make a lot of noise and smoke but never accomplish anything.

The apostles found encouragement in two things:

First, the sovereignty of God, his overruling control of human events. The very first word of their prayer recognizes this, "Sovereign Lord." The word in Greek is in the word from which we get our word, despot. "O Mighty Despot, [Tyrant, Ruler over men], who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them." God holds the world in the palm of his hand, and is intimately involved in every human event.

They found great consolation in that, but I find many Christians have forgotten it. A year or so ago I brought a message on the war in Viet Nam, and spoke of what God was doing in that situation. After the meeting a young man came up to me, livid with rage. He said, "I'm so angry I can hardly contain myself!" I said, "What about?" He replied, "The idea that you suggested, that God is involved in the war in Viet Nam." I asked him, "Are you a Christian?" He said, "Yes, I am. I will admit that the Bible teaches that God involves himself occasionally in human affairs, but he certainly has nothing to do with the war in Viet Nam!"

That is certainly a badly distorted and mistaken concept of history. These disciples had no such idea. They openly recognized that God had even predicted the very opposition they faced. They quoted the second Psalm in support of it. They had clearly been doing what Christians ought to do under pressure: They had gone to the Scriptures. They had found in the second Psalm the prediction of the actual opposition they were facing. The psalm said,

**'Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples [the Israelites] imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth set themselves in array,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed' -- {Acts 4:25b-26 RSV}**

When they read that they said to themselves, "There, that's exactly what has happened. Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the others, the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, have set themselves against the Lord Jesus. We saw it happen right in this very city. It's not surprising, not unexpected; it's exactly what God said would happen." They found great encouragement in the fact that this event was not beyond divine control; the opposition they were facing was anticipated for no human event gets out of hand, as far as God is concerned. He has power to overrule in any situation, and that is what they counted on. They did not try to arouse a popular uprising because that only creates violence -- violence begets violence. But they relied upon a God who works in strange and unusual ways through human events to change them without violence.

This second thing they saw is what we might call, *the mystery of history*. You can see it in the last sentence of the account. "Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and the people of Israel were gathered together to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place." Did you get that? In other words, the God of history uses the very opposition to accomplish his purposes! That is what they saw. God worked through the free will of man. These people opposed the plan of God. They tried to thwart God's purposes. They tried to derail his program. But God operates in such a marvelous way that he uses even this opposition to accomplish his will. That is the story of the cross and of the resurrection of Jesus.

That principle is what these Christians reckoned upon. They recognized a principle at work in human affairs which is the most powerful force known to man, and which the church frequently ignores to its peril. There is a striking passage I ran across this week in reading the New English Bible. Let me share it with you. It is found in the twelfth chapter of Job.

**In God's hand are the souls of all that live,
the spirits of all humankind.
Wisdom and might are his;
with him are firmness and understanding.**

**If he pulls down, there is no rebuilding;
if he imprisons, there is no release.
If he holds up the waters, there is drought;
if he lets them go, they turn the land upside down.
Strength and success belong to him,
deceived and deceiver are his to use.
He makes counselors behave like idiots,
and drives judges mad;
he looses the bonds imposed by kings,
and removes the girdle of office from their waists;
he makes priests behave like idiots,
and overthrows men long in office;
those who are trusted he strikes dumb,
he takes away the judgment of old men;
he heaps scorn on princes
and abates the arrogance of nobles.
He leads peoples astray, and destroys them,
he lays them low, and there they lie.
He takes away their wisdom from the rulers of the nations
and leaves them wandering in a pathless wilderness;
they grope in the darkness without light,
and are left to wander like a drunkard.
He uncovers mysteries deep in obscurity,
and into thick darkness he brings light. {Job 12:10-22 NEB}**

That is the overruling power of God. That is what these Christians relied on. This is the true strength of the church. It is the weapon of faith-prayer; tremendous in its possibilities. Resting upon this, these disciples now make their request,

"And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy Lord with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus." {Acts 4:29-30 RSV}

Do you know what they are saying, in essence? "Do it again, Lord. Do it again. Here we are in trouble and in danger of our lives, but this is great, Lord. Do it again." They are asking for more.

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. {Acts 4:31 RSV}

God answered that prayer in a three-fold way: First, he shook the place in which they were praying. In Acts there is a frequent use of symbolic actions on God's part. Remember on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given there were three symbols connected with it: The mighty rushing of wind, the appearance of tongues of fire, and the new languages that were spoken -- the gift of tongues. Those were symbols expressive of the working of the Holy Spirit throughout the whole age of the Spirit, the age in which we are yet living. Here also is a symbolic act. This shaking of the place is God's symbolic answer to these disciples' prayer. He is saying to them, in this figurative way, that he would shake Jerusalem and the world by the message these disciples were proclaiming. Less than forty years after this event the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by Roman armies; the authority of the priests was broken in the city; and finally the entire nation, the religious theocracy of Israel was shaken and the people were dispersed throughout the nations of the world. For almost twenty centuries, two thousand years, Jewish government was not permitted to come into power again. And within two hundred years the empire was shaken to its core. The principles of Christianity penetrated and permeated all strata of Roman society and changed them and transformed them. In the fourth century it emerged as the state religion of the empire. I do not think that was a triumph. When Constantine made Christianity the state religion it was a trick of the enemy to destroy true faith and its effectiveness. It was a counterattack by the enemy which proved greatly effective. But before that time Christianity had greatly transformed the structure and power of the Roman empire.

Now what is all this saying to us in our day? Many young people are troubled by the power structures, by the establishments. They see evil in them, and rightly so. They see they are not doing what they were set up to do. Well, then, what does one do about it? The answer of this account is: There is a mighty force, mightier than you can ever dream, at work in society upon which you can rely to enable you to do what these disciples did; to proclaim a message which is the most powerful revolutionary message the world has ever seen; to speak the Word of God with boldness in the filling of the Holy Spirit. To do this is to shake society to its very core. That is what these disciples discovered.

The factor which produces righteousness, peace, order, prosperity, blessing and happiness in a land is not the form of government which exists. It is not the Constitution of the United States, or the Declaration of Independence, which is preserving American liberty, even to the degree we still have it today. These are not our guarantees; they cannot protect us. We ought to take careful note of the motto of the new state of Hawaii which was adopted in the days of the missionaries in 1820. While still a territory this motto was adopted:

Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono

which means, "The life of the land is preserved by righteousness." It is not the Constitution that preserves the United States. The Constitution can be twisted, manipulated, distorted, and made to apply in a variety of ways, as the Supreme Court has shown us many times in our history. The Constitution will not protect us or preserve justice. What preserves justice? Righteousness! A people who are dedicated to the will and purpose of God, and who recognize the life of God in their midst. That is what preserves a land. That is the only thing that ever has or ever will. The lack of righteousness has been the reason for the overturn of civilization after civilization. Arnold Toynbee has counted some twenty-six civilizations that have come and gone. They failed because they were not built upon righteousness. Here, on almost the two hundredth birthday of the United States, it is well to remember that the thing that has preserved us as a nation to this time and has allowed what liberties we have or have ever had was not the wisdom of our forefathers, or the documents by which they set this nation in motion, but the faith that pervaded this land, the reality of righteousness in response to that faith, the life of God at work in this country. And that is the way to preserve it, by a return to righteousness.

Now this is the effect of the message of Jesus and the resurrection. It is to bring again new life pouring from a living Christ into dying and dead people and institutions, changing them, awakening them, arousing them again to righteousness, to right living, living in accordance with reality. The only hope of this nation is the proclamation of this message in every possible way in the fullness of the power of the Holy Spirit. God has made provision that we might do as these disciples did. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, "they spoke the word with all boldness." That has a shaking effect upon all the structures of society.

Prayer:

We are so mixed up, Father, and so confused in our thinking so much of the time. We need desperately to have our minds set right and to see things clearly, to understand the nature of reality. Preserve us, Father, from misguided zeal, from consecrated blundering, from stumbling along trying to do the right thing, and doing precisely the wrong. Help us to understand how you work, and to operate intelligently and not stupidly. We ask you, Lord, to reveal to us the underlying foment and ferments in society that are the result of your Spirit at work among men, and to line up with them; to take our stand with these men and women of old who have meant so much to us and without which human life today would be impossible. Had they not been obedient to the word of truth we would not be here today. We ask that you will make us like them in this day and this generation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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