Is Civil Disobedience Biblical?
Romans 13
BQ032513

RESISTANCE TO GOVERNMENT IS REBELLION AGAINST GOD

Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; (13:2a)

The logical ramification is simple. Because civil government is an institution of God, to rebel against government is to rebel against the God who has established it. In his commentary on Romans, the nineteenth-century Scottish evangelist Robert Haldane wrote, "The people of God then ought to consider resistance to the government under which they live as a very awful crime, even as resistance to God Himself" (*An Exposition of Romans* [McLean, Va.: MacDonald Pub. Co., n.d.], p. 579).

The seriousness with which God takes rebellion is illustrated vividly in the book of Numbers. God had chosen Moses not only to be the human lawgiver but to be the human leader of Israel as He delivered her from Egypt and led her through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The Lord also had appointed Moses' brother Aaron to be high priest. During that journey, a group of some 250 malcontents, led by Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On, "assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, 'You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?… Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us?' " (Num. 16:3, 13).

The Lord was so angered by their insolence "that the ground that was under them split open;… Fire also came forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense" (vv. 31–35). Incredibly, the people learned nothing from that awful judgment. Instead of drawing them back to God, it merely escalated their hatred of His chosen leaders. "On the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You are the ones who have caused the death of the Lord's people' " (v. 41). In response to that defiant accusation, the Lord sent a deadly plague that instantly killed "14,700, besides those who died on account of Korah" (v. 49). Had not Aaron intervened by making atonement for the people, the entire congregation would have been annihilated (vv. 46–48).

THOSE WHO RESIST GOVERNMENT WILL BE PUNISHED

and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. (13:2b)

Paul is doubtless not speaking about God's direct judgment on those **who have opposed** civil authority but rather the **condemnation** men suffer from the government itself as punishment for crime. As the apostle mentions a few verses later, civil authority "is a minister of God, an avenger who

brings wrath upon the one who practices evil" (Rom. 13:4).

A graphic and striking illustration of this principle came from our Lord Himself. When He was being taken prisoner in the garden, to be unjustly accused and executed, Peter drew a sword to fight the soldiers (authorities) who came to take Him. If ever there was a just cause for revolt, that would seem to have been it. But Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). Jesus affirmed that, no matter how noble the cause, government has the right to execute a murderer.

The Mosaic law prescribed many kinds of punishment, all of which were appropriate to the offense committed. For theft, the punishment included restitution, returning that which was stolen or payment of equal value. If he had no money or property with which to repay, the thief was required to work out his debt.

Under Mosaic law, punishment was always public. The offender was shamed before his family, friends, and society as a means of deterrence. Punishment was also generally corporal. The lashes of the whip, for example, brought immediate physical and bodily pain. But with the obvious exception of execution, punishment was also short-term. And, once the penalty was paid, the offender was free to pursue his life again.

Under Old Testament law, punishment was to be without pity for the offender. "You shall not pity him [a murderer], but you shall purge the blood of the innocent from Israel, that it may go well with you" (Deut. 19:13). That policy is in stark contrast to what is found in many societies today, where often more pity is expressed for criminals than for their victims.

Punishment under Mosaic law had several objectives. First, it was administered as a matter of justice, of appropriate retribution for a crime or other evil committed: "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Deut. 19:21). But this well-known precept of "eye for eye"—much maligned in our day—was given by God as much to prevent over-punishment as under-punishment. It must also be noted that punishment was to be determined and administered by the proper civil authority, not by victims. Personal revenge was not involved.

Second, punishment was to be a deterrent to crime—to discourage the guilty person from committing further crime and to discourage others from following his unlawful example. "Then all the people will hear and be afraid, and will not act presumptuously again" (Deut. 17:13; cf. 13:11; 19:20).
Third, Mosaic law required impartiality. The guilty were to be punished, regardless of their wealth, social standing, or position in the community—even if they were members of one's own family, "your brother, your mother's son, or your son or daughter, or the wife you cherish, or your friend who is as your own soul" (Deut. 13:6).

Fourth, punishment was to be without delay. “If the wicked man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall then make him lie down and be beaten in his presence with the number of stripes according to his guilt” (Deut. 25:2). Most punishment was administered on the spot, immediately after the sentence was declared. The principle of speedy trial and punishment is found in the constitutions of most modern democracies, but unfortunately it is frequently acknowledged more by disregard than by observance. Apparently the principle was also sometimes disregarded in Israel, hence the warning in Ecclesiastes: “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil” (Eccles. 8:11).

Fifth—again with the exception of execution—Old Testament law provided for pardon and rehabilitation. The guilty person could be beaten “forty times but no more, lest he beat him with many more stripes than these, and your brother be degraded in your eyes” (Deut. 25:3). Criminals were not to be permanently stigmatized. Once an offender paid his penalty, he was to be accepted back into society as a respectable citizen.

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