

## Is violent Civil Disobedience ever justified?

Written by Calvin Fox

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Francis Schaeffer presents an extensive argument from Scripture and History in support of Civil Disobedience in his "Christian Manifesto". I will use it as a basis to formulate my own understanding of the subject vis-a-vis how the Colonials were thinking prior to the American Revolution. We have already established elsewhere that there is a Biblical basis for believing

1. Government as such is instituted by God for the well-being of a Country
2. A particular King [or Substitute] is subservient to God and exists as His servant and is accountable to Him for his actions
3. A King serves his people but that must be under the Law of God and according to it.
4. As such, the People must obey and support the King (pay taxes)
5. This arrangement between God and King and People is a Covenant or Contract.
6. If and when a King [or Substitute] puts Himself above the Law of God and does not serve Him, ie- if he should break the Covenant, the People are not to obey him. To do so would be to disobey God! They believe that God will judge the King and remove him in time.

Most Biblical Christians will agree with these propositions. Certainly the majority of people in Medieval Europe, England and the Colonists agreed. More debate comes with the next point.

7. Civil disobedience to an ungodly King and suffering for it is not enough in some cases. If the King's actions threatened to destroy the Country or all the Christians in it, the latter have the duty to resist, by violence if necessary. There are precedents in Scripture for a king's subjects refusing to obey him when he has become tyrannical and oppressive to them, eg- 1 Samuel 10:17-25, 1 Kings 11-12 and 2 Chronicles 10-12. Violence and war usually ensued, but initiated by the King, not the protestors who defended themselves. God Himself destroys monarchies when they have turned from Him and broken His Law, especially about Idolatry. In fact He used the rebels in these stories to do that.

Principle 6 is Schaeffer's position and to justify it he gives several historical examples in European and English History, besides the Biblical ones, and then he applies them to present day America. But most of Schaeffer's examples involve national politics, specifically conflict between Roman Catholic Monarchs and Protestant subjects. In fact, none of Schaeffer's examples seem to me to be instances of a King consciously refusing to obey God and rejecting Him to promote Idolatry. On the contrary, the Kings being resisted all seemed to think obeying God is exactly what they were doing. Of course, many of the reformers disagreed with that. I am not convinced here is anything comparable in America today and certainly not to his major concern: Abortion.

Schaeffer's first historical example is the only exception to the political motive.. It concerns Roman Emperors forcing Christians to deny Christ and worship the Emperor instead. It seems

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the most obvious parallel to that in modern History would be the persecution by Hitler of Jews and the persecution by Communist Dictators of many Christian groups in Eastern Europe and China. There are also examples of Muslim Governments against many Christians in their Countries (including the genocide by Turkey of Armenian Christians and today, as I write, there is oppression of Coptic Believers in Egypt and of Christians in South Sudan by the Muslim Government of North Sudan. Do the examples apply to these latter situations and justify resistance?

### **Historical Examples of Christians and Civil Disobedience or Resistance.**

William Tyndale disobeyed the King's order to stop translating Scripture into the language of the people. After many years in exile, he was finally betrayed and executed.

John Bunyan refused to obey the King's order to stop preaching the Gospel and for refusing to support the established Church of England. He spent many years in and out of prison before taking ill and dying at age 59.

Dutch Protestants (Calvinists) fought against Catholic Spain which was seeking to conquer what would become Holland- they won.

Swedish, Norwegian and Danish Lutherans overthrew Catholic Kings and Bishops making their Countries Protestant

In Germany and surrounding Countries, Catholic armies fought Protestant armies for 30 years. This ended in a Peace treaty and many new Geo-political arrangements and the decline of Roman Church power in the area.

It seems Schaeffer's biggest hero on this subject was Scottish firebrand John Knox in the mid-16th Century. Other would-be reformers preceded him, but he is the major one in Scotland. Knox was very involved in politics in both Scotland and England, boldly attacking anyone with whom he disagreed about both Religion and Morals, whether on the Throne or in the established Church. Knox led open resistance to Mary Tudor, also known as "Bloody Mary" (to Protestants) in England and Mary Stuart, her cousin, also known as Mary Queen of Scots. Both were Catholic monarchs (actually the young Mary of Scots was controlled by her mother, another Mary) In the eyes of Mr Knox, both Queens violated the Law of God by supporting the Roman Catholic Church and by persecuting Protestants.

John Knox wrote a famous and incendiary book on the subject of Civil Disobedience. It is called The Admonition to England. He argued that the people of a Country have the right and duty to disobey and rebel if the King "ruled contrary to the Bible". The King must obey God's Laws. If he doesn't, he is a tyrant and must be opposed. His book inflamed the French Protestants called Huguenots, who's slogan was "No King but Jesus", and inspired them to battle the Catholic King of that Country which led to the slaughter of perhaps 50,000 of them by the Catholic army.

One admirer has called John Knox "compelling, magnetic, stern, dauntless, harsh, intolerant,

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vehement, indomitable, steadfast, unmoveable." He had "saved" Scotland from Romanism and Anglicanism and established the Presbyterian "kirk" as the dominant church in Scotland. There were many positive secular social, economic and political consequences in that Country as a result of his preaching. (The same was true everywhere the Reformation took hold) Knox died quietly at home in 1572.

[What about Cromwell? How does he differ from Knox?]

A fellow Scottish Presbyterian revolutionary, Samuel Rutherford, picked up Knox's cause in the next generation. He also wrote a very influential book called *Lex Rex* in 1644. *Lex Rex* argues for limited government and the restraint of monarchical power. It vindicates the rights of the people to stand against absolute monarchy. Rutherford was one of the most influential "Divines" who drafted and adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643) Nearly every member of the Westminster Assembly owned a copy of *Lex Rex*

. It remains one of the most comprehensive expressions of Calvinistic political theory. It was very influential among the American Colonists in the next Century and used to justify the Declaration of Independence and Revolution

Scripture clearly demonstrated that there was no such thing as the "Divine Right of Kings" to do whatever they wanted. Rutherford was emphatic about this. The Law is King, not the other way around. If the King disobeys the Law, the people have the right and duty to disobey the King. Of course, this was considered treason by the King. In turn, Kings that rule without the approval of God are (by definition) tyrants and tyrannical governments are immoral and will oppress the people. We must support Government as such but not a King who commands his people to do anything contrary to the Law of God.

According to Schaeffer, John Locke secularized *Lex Rex* and Rutherford's arguments about the Right of the people to revolt against a Tyrant with force if necessary. There can be no legal justice without the legitimate exercise of force. A fallen world will always require force, but a distinction must be made between justified, legitimate use of force and over the top violence. The latter is never justified. However, before using force, Schaeffer argues, there must be protest and non-violent resistance. (And he goes on about that vis-a-vis his particular concern our Government's pro-choice positions re Abortion.)

[What about Nazi Germany and the Confessing Church and Bonhoeffer's part in a plot to assassinate Hitler?]

My problem with all of this is not over the right for Christians to disobey. I agree that it is our duty to do so if and when our "King" disobeys God and/or requires Christians to do that also. The problem is how do we know today when that is happening. Our Government does not forbid the Tyndale's among us from translating Scripture, but it does restrict where, when and how Scripture may be used (especially in public events and in public schools). Is this restriction or our compliance disobedience of God?

We are blessed as a Nation to have the Constitution we do. It limits our Government and

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greatly restricts ways in which any "King" may become a Tyrant over us. For example, in matters of Religion our Government obeys our Constitution about not establishing any Religion. It also does not forbid anyone from preaching or practicing their personal Religion in non-public or government settings. Americans have complete freedom in matters of Religious Worship.

These are the issues Schaeffer uses to illustrate the need for Civil Disobedience in the past. The issue of abortion that he is most concerned about when he wrote [1982] is not like those examples. I'm not sure what issues today would warrant his concern. Using Schaeffer's examples, today's issues in America are not a call for civil disobedience.

If the Government required dissenting Clergy to perform Weddings for gay couples would call for protest. In Colonial times the English King was forcing Colonialists to pay taxes for what the Colonialists thought was unjust and resisted that. Likewise, we could claim the the right to resist our Government if it requires our taxes for something we believe is unscriptural such as Abortions or Universal Health Insurance or certain Welfare Programs or "stimulus" plans or bankruptcy "bailouts". Besides taxes, the Government also requires many Fees and Regulations which we may believe are unjust, We may protest all of these actions, but does any of this really call for disobedience or civil resistance?

Schaeffer goes on to argue we must oppose non-Biblical World Views. By the end of his book, what we are to oppose became broader and less clear and more problematic. Are we called to civil resistance about what is taught in public schools, eg- Evolution or other subjects from a secular, naturalistic perspective or from a liberal and PC Ideology. Where or how do we draw the line there? What if we didn't approve of spending money on a particular war or "Homeland Security" or disaster relief? of ever increasing National Debt in order to support new Health Insurance or so-called Entitlement Programs? How could the Government function if everyone claims the right to resist whatever they feel like? . We need more clear guidance than what Schaeffer offers.

Our Constitution provides legitimate avenues for political change at any level (our democratic version of overthrowing the King) There are Elections, Recalls and Court Appeals (and we see the increasing use of Referenda). The avenues we have for civil resistance are the use of protests and public demonstrations, strikes, slowdowns, mediation and some kinds of non-participation (not buying the "product" being pushed on us). All these are means we may use to try to change the Law. Armed revolt (violent civil disobedience) is something else and I see no Scriptural basis for it.

However if the Government were to take away or deny Americans these avenues to make change or the right to protest (freedom of assembly and free speech) in these ways, that would call for other kinds of action. If "unalienable" rights that are God-given are made alienable by the "King", leaving us with no legal recourse to protest and reclaim those rights, then we have a different situation. Then the Government would be establishing itself as God. It would be assuming the role of the Anti-Christ by taking total control over our lives. In this extreme case, I believe Christians (and all citizens) would have the duty to resist the Government, violently if necessary. Was that the case in 1776?

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The belief in unalienable, Natural, God-given Rights made in the Declaration was a common argument for the times. It is accepted that its Preamble was modeled on the one adopted by Virginia, primarily written by George Mason, on June 12, 1776 -

*SECTION I. That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.□*

*SEC. 3. That government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation, or community; of all the various modes and forms of government, that is best which is capable of producing the greatest degree of happiness and safety and is most effectually secured against the danger of maladministration; and that, when any government shall be found inadequate or contrary to these purposes, a majority of the community hath an indubitable, inalienable, and indefeasible right to reform, alter, or abolish it, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the public weal.*

(The Virginia Document is a useful interpretive commentary on the entire Federal Bill of Rights)

The Declaration was taken seriously but had no legal authority and was not a "big deal" in its time, overshadowed by the War and its consequences. The Declaration received scant attention for at least 50 years and then only at July 4th Celebrations. Its language was very open ended and subject to applications that could be inflammatory, including the opening words, "We the People" and "all men are created equal". The new "States" adopted their own Constitutions which included some form of a Bill of Rights but chose words that helped them deal with their regional concerns. Basically, they rejected one or the other of the above Sections of the Virginia Bill of Rights. The hot-button topics of the times were property (slavery), suffrage (universal voting rights) and States rights vs Federalism (the right to revolt! or to secede). Thus Northern State Constitutions by and large kept the affirmation of individual Rights while minimizing talk of "social contract" and the right of the People to abolish or reform Government and the Southern States generally kept that language but eliminated talk of individual Rights.

The final draft of the 1776 Declaration of Independence purposely avoided these topics by using vague and general words and phrases. (It needed to be a compromise document to be ratified.) Thus, various groups through out our History have given these open ended words and phrases various and often conflicting meanings that served their particular cause. In 1776, the words that were most important were those that listed the reasons justifying a war for Independence. It is not surprising that long after that war was won, the Preamble has become far more important to most Americans and is used as "Scripture" to support many disparate causes unimagined by the Founders. But we must consider whether the violent disobedience and resistance of the Colonists was justified from a Biblical perspective.

The Preamble alone was not sufficient to justify the War. Following the idealistic principles of the Preamble, Jefferson gets down to cataloging specific facts and reasons to justify civil disobedience in 1776 by the British Colonists against their British King. Let's see if any of the above arguments compare to the ones Schaeffer used to justify civil disobedience and

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resistance to our Government today.

### The Declaration of Independence and Civil Disobedience

#### Introduction

*"When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation"*

The Colonists do not believe this is merely a disagreement with their Government, a political dispute; they believe this is a momentous event in all of History. It is about "one people", the citizens of a Nation, separating from their Mother Country [implying they are now a different People] and becoming a new and separate Nation. This will not be a civil war. This venture has become "necessary" and what follows in the Declaration are the reasons for it.

Some have tried to use the argument for the Colonies to separate from England to justify the separation of the Southern States almost a century latter. But this is not valid. The 11 Southern States that declared Secession in 1860-61 in order to form the Confederate States of America. They were not seeking a revolution, a war of Independence. They claimed that the United States itself was not a Union, but a Confederation of sovereign States such as themselves and as such they had a right to secede. The Federal Government denied that definition. The Constitution acknowledges the rights of States, but they are not sovereign. The Republic is sovereign over all the States. The States are not confederated but permanently united States with no constitutional right to secede. Denying the 11 States a right to secede the federal Government proceeded with military action against the seceders to preserve the union of the American People. This is not comparable to what happened in 1776 between England and the Colonists.

#### The Preamble

The famous Preamble which begins with *"we hold these truths to be self-evident"* ends with *"wh en a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, ... such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government."*

#### The Indictment of George III

*The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. (emphasis added) To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world."*

There are four categories of grievances. Charges 1-12 refer to the King's abuse of executive

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power; charges 13-22 refer to unconstitutional legislation by the King in collusion with Parliament (including the taxation without consent and the revoking of the right to trial by jury); charges 23-27 include unjustified and terrible acts of war by the Military at the Kings command, against the Colonialists who were, of course, English subjects; and the last charge In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

These charges were offered as conclusive proof that the King was a Despot

### **The Declaration closes with a denunciation of the British People**

*In spite of repeated complaints and reports to them of what the King was doing to their fellow citizens, They have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.*

### **Conclusion**

*We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States,...*

*And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.*

In 1776, there was not cause higher than "sacred Honor". The Founders were serious! Did they meet Schaeffer's criteria to justify violent civil disobedience and resistance, ie- Revolution? Did they meet Scriptural criteria?