

FRANCIS SCHAEFFER AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Written by Calvin Fox

Thursday, 31 December 2015 15:52 - Last Updated Monday, 09 May 2016 12:45

Francis Schaeffer presents an extensive argument from Scripture and History in support of Civil Disobedience in his book, *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. There is a clear 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
4. As the King must obey the Law, the People must obey and support the King
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 American Colonists agreed. However, the next point is debated.

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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. Many examples from History can be given.

Common examples of Civil Disobedience by Christians are William Tyndale, John Bunyan, the Dutch Protestants (Calvinists) fighting against Catholic Spain which seeking to conquer what would become Holland; and Swedish, Norwegian and Danish Lutherans resisting oppressive Catholic Kings and Bishops in their Nations. In Germany and surrounding Countries, Catholic armies fought Protestant armies for 30 years.

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 wrote a famous and incendiary book on the subject of Civil Disobedience.

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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.

There were many positive secular social, economic and political consequences as a result of all this Resistance. The same was true everywhere the Reformation took hold.

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.

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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.

We are blessed as a Nation to have the Constitution we do. It limits our Government and 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. If the Government required dissenting Clergy to perform Weddings for gay couples would probably 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

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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?

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.

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