

## A Higher Authority

sermon digest

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Acts 5:17-42

larry dipboye

Opposed to slavery and the Mexican-American War, Henry David Thoreau's 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience" advocated taking personal action to oppose government injustice. Thoreau went to jail for refusing to pay a poll tax. He wrote: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.... If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose." Thoreau's essay focused on political philosophy and human ethics in a particular historical context, human slavery and an unnecessary, unjust war. Thoreau's essay was not religious; he believed that personal conscience was superior to the rule of law and that the collective power of government tended to gravitate toward injustice.

In his autobiography, Martin Luther King, Jr, later acknowledged, "The teachings of Thoreau came alive in our civil rights movement; indeed, they are more alive than ever before. Whether expressed in a sit-in at lunch counters, a freedom ride into Mississippi, a peaceful protest in Albany, Georgia, a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, these are outgrowths of Thoreau's insistence that evil must be resisted and that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice." The memory of the Holocaust was still fresh when Jewish theologian Martin Buber discovered the relevance Thoreau's civil disobedience: "The question here is not just about one of the numerous individual cases in the struggle between a truth powerless to act and a power that has become the enemy of truth. It is really a question of the absolutely concrete demonstration of the point at which this struggle at any moment becomes man's duty as man." (*Man's Duty as Man*, p. 19)

Thoreau is often credited with inventing civil disobedience adopted by controversial figures like Gandhi in opposition to British Colonialism and Martin Luther King, Jr, in opposition to Jim Crow laws. Public protest to racial segregation or the Vietnam War became a common feature of the daily news in the 1960's. The public peace was disturbed. Opponents spoke out in defense of "law and order"; but public opinion was swayed, laws changed, and a war ended. The debate was purely secular—about political process. But a far earlier example of civil disobedience in Acts was about the ultimate source of authority in life, the rule of God in the human conscience.

**The issue is authority.** Peter and John had been engaged in a running dispute with the authorities. They had been arrested and gagged once. They were told to stop preaching about Jesus and warned of dire consequences. It was then that Peter and John declared: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." Did Peter and John know the identity of this council? This was no less than the committee behind the crucifixion of Jesus, the Sanhedrin dominated by the Sadducee party. They ran religious affairs, they had their own police force, and they had considerable influence with the Roman government. All religion was state religion, and Mother Rome specifically allowed the Sanhedrin control in Jewish territory. Their judgment on Jesus had been to sacrifice the radical to save the people. One man is always expendable. Two certainly could be sacrificed for the sake of peace.

Peter and John appear either stupid or crazy—or, maybe they know something. Luke calls it "Spirit," the Spirit of God. The Sanhedrin is convinced that the apostles are certainly full of something—probably a devil. Released from jail, they went right back to preaching Christ and healing the sick. Again they were arrested. This time an angel of God opened prison doors and sent them to the middle of the Temple in the face of the Sanhedrin to return to preaching the gospel. By the third arrest and Peter's second declaration of independence, "We must obey God rather than any human authority," the authorities were getting hostile. They were so enraged that they might have snuffed out these two bugs without permission from Rome, but one Gamaliel appeared on the scene.

Gamaliel is described as a Pharisee, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people. Remember, the Council was dominated by Sadducees. It's funny how a radical can sometimes get respect. Gamaliel had done his homework. He knew history. He took a much longer view of the present situation than did the Council; he cited case evidence that merely human movements contain the seeds of their own destruction, while movements inspired by God cannot be stopped. (Could he be thinking of Jesus?) The apostles were getting their gall from somewhere. The Sanhedrin did not want to declare war on God. For the time being, they had the apostles flogged and repeated their demand for silence and released them.

The confrontation between the apostles and the Sanhedrin has often been cited as a biblical model for civil disobedience—a tool of the weak and the disenfranchised to expose corruption and injustice. Instead of starting a revolution with arms, the apostles applied passive resistance to authority. But the political motive was missing. The apostles were not trying to break the authority of the Sanhedrin or to take over the

religious establishment in Jerusalem. The whole exchange was about the ultimate question of authority. Who is in charge here, God or government? Christians do not receive marching orders or permission to speak from civil authority. In a world where religion existed by the expressed permission and operated by the might of civil authority, the apostles declared their ultimate allegiance to God alone. Their worship and obedience rested with the God who had called them out and sent them into the world. They also knew that to stand in the face of authority and declare allegiance to a higher power was sure death in that world, yet it was this kind of civil disobedience that eventually changed the Roman world.

***It all depends on your point of view.*** The advice of Gamaliel was, “let them be.” Let time sort out the truth. You may even be fighting God. The Sanhedrin was convinced. This may be the first case of religious liberty in human history. Somehow Gamaliel convinced the brethren that God does not have to be protected. Finally, error fails and truth survives.

Do you believe that? Carried to its logical conclusion, this is pretty radical stuff. It suggests that there is a place somewhere in this world for religious pluralism. Gamaliel claimed that all religion stands or falls by the power of God, that false religion will fail under the weight of its own corruption. Later Christians argued that Gamaliel was a closet Christian trying to maintain credibility in the Jewish world. Others have opposed his *laissez faire* philosophy on the basis that error has no rights. Both Paul and Peter would advise Christians to be good citizens, to go along with the powers that be, that government is the enemy of evil.

Billy Graham stirred up a firestorm of controversy back home, when he visited the Soviet Union and preached from Romans 13 “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” Conservative Christians in the US were outraged that he could advise cooperation with an atheist government. Many of the same folks were also outraged with civil disobedience in the US. They argued religious liberty in the Soviet Union and religious control at home.

All of us would draw lines and set limits on human behavior regardless of the claimed source. All of us would agree to some extent with Paul’s declaration that government is necessary to maintain order. I strongly support religious liberty, but I don’t support the right to kill in the name of God. I don’t support the right of adults to marry children, to have a harem, or to drink poison or handle snakes in the name of God. Honesty requires that I would set limits on what people should be allowed to do in the name of religion, yes, in the name of god.

***Truth thrives on freedom.*** It is called the “Gamaliel Principle.” The issue is far too complex simply to support a do-as-you-please approach to religion. It seems that Gamaliel was convinced that truth has a way of rising to the top; thus, truth thrives on freedom.

Jesus was so convinced of the harmony of truth and freedom that he declared truth to be the door to freedom, “the truth will make you free.” (John 8:32) According to John, freedom and truth were at issue in the trial of Jesus (18:37-38). In the background every Christian has to remember that Jesus was crucified at the bidding of religious authority hiding behind the institutional strength of government. It’s strange how we forget.

Within a few centuries, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Church was in the driver’s seat, in the same place of control that had been owned by the Sanhedrin—less Gamaliel. It became the business of the church to manage truth and to protect God from false religion. Freedom became the enemy of the established church. Officials feared not only freedom of action but freedom of thought and conscience. Allow freedom to seek the truth based on evidence, and before long someone will come along teaching that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo emerged in the seventeenth century teaching a heliocentric world, and he was censured by the church and silenced. Of course, Galileo was right, supported in the court of physical evidence. Gamaliel was also right, finally supported in the court of human history.

The guiding principle of medicine—do no harm—ought to determine the limits of freedom in matters of religion. It far too easy for us to assume that we are the good guys and that freedom is intended only for our party, religion, or government; but the truth about all human institutions including the church, our church, is that they are tainted with imperfection by the human touch. That is why we need to look to a higher authority than the rule of law or church control. The authority of truth and the will of God are the same.

Paul said it: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Philippians 4:8)