

Christian Disobedience

sermon digest

May 6, 2012

Acts 4:1-20

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In an orderly world, it seems that you need authorization for almost everything. Education and training is not enough. Attorneys must pass the state board exam and physicians must be licensed before practicing their professions. Local governments have licensing requirements for plumbers, electricians, and carpenters to assure public safety. We would not want to be a passenger on an airliner that did not have a licensed pilot, and we certainly want truck drivers to meet commercial licensing qualifications before taking their big rigs onto the highways. Pastoral psychologist Wayne Oates noted that the most significant moment of coming of age in our society is a *drivers license*. He once suggested that churches add to their list of rituals a rite of passage for teens entering the adult world of the automobile. The church ought to recognize and bless the event.

After graduation from high school I began my preparation for ministry at Baylor University. My church sent me off with a certificate, a “license to preach.” The license got me a ministerial student discount on tuition at the University. I had to sign a contract that required repayment if I failed to enter the ministry. In Texas that license also authorized me to perform weddings and to sign the certificate of marriage. I recall the sense of authority I felt when I first could say at the conclusion of a wedding, “by the authority vested in me as a minister of the Gospel recognized by the State of Texas, I pronounce you husband and wife.” Comedian Grady Nutt was also a ministerial student at Baylor. I heard a performance in which Grady told about being licensed to preach in Texas at age twelve. He noted the authority that his church had assigned to a mere child and speculated about the chaos he could have created in high school by indiscriminately performing weddings for his peers.

An orderly society needs a clear system of authorities. I think that we agree on the necessity of licensing authority. Should we really be surprised or offended at the action of the authorities in Jerusalem?

Like good Jews, Peter and John went to the Temple at the 3:00 hour of prayer. A lame beggar at the Gate Beautiful asked for money. Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” The man walked, Peter preached, and 5,000 souls were added to the 3,000 who had already responded to the gospel at Pentecost. The lesson of the day was interrupted by the authorities—the priests, the captain of the Temple, and the Sadducees, “much annoyed” at the message, “that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.” So, of course, Peter and John were arrested.

The next day the prisoners were brought before the assembly of priests, probably the Sanhedrin, to face the question of the day: “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Peter, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” was more than pleased to answer. After all, this was an open door for another sermon. First, he clarified the accusation. The Apostles were being interrogated because of a *good deed* for someone who was sick. They had done nothing to interrupt the daily prayers in the Temple. They were not terrorists exploiting fear or revolutionaries destroying life and property. They were healers. The “this” for which they were arrested was defense exhibit number one: “This man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.” Oops! You can hear the buzzer going off—wrong name!

We might assume that the same actions in the name of Moses or Abraham would have been acceptable. Besides, Peter and John did not have a license to preach. They had not been to Baylor. Actually they had not attended any proper schools. They were not qualified as priests, theologians (scribes), or rabbis (teachers); yet, they had claimed the authorities equal to all of the above.

The ruling council made a few observations: Peter and John acted with authority; they were bold. But they also were “uneducated and ordinary men.” New Testament scholar Walter Wink called them “obstreperous idiots” (*Christian Century*, April 13, 1994, p. 381). The Greek word translated “ordinary” is *idiotai* from which we get our English equivalent “idiots.” Remember, the Sadducees were of the aristocratic, priestly class. They were a cut above ordinary people. This was not a peer level conversation. The Council was called *archontos*, rulers of the present age. They were the established authorities recognized internally by the religion and externally by the Roman government to maintain

order. Peter and John were guilty of upsetting the order of things, and they had no authority. They were common, ordinary *idiots*.

These idiots responded to the questioning authorities with a self-assured arrogance that could have gotten them killed and that later came to characterize the way of the church. Luke cites Peter's authority as one "filled with the Holy Spirit," the very authority of God. But he also comes across as a rather skilled attorney for his own defense. Peter pointed to the lame man now standing before them, then centered his license to heal in the name Jesus Christ of Nazareth crucified and raised from the dead.

Now, I think that we can agree that an orderly society needs a system of authority; but are there exceptions to the rule? Is there a higher authority over the governing body? We are a law abiding people. With our blessing, we provided a place for Habitat for Humanity to teach and license construction workers for the removal of lead paint from old buildings. Before we began our Table of Grace program of meals for people in need, we checked with authorities about limitations and license to feed the public, and several of our folks audited a class on food safety. Of all people, we ought to understand the necessity of keeping law and order around the Temple.

Commitment to holy justice sometimes leads to civil disobedience. To the credit of the Sanhedrin, punishing Peter and John for doing a good deed was hardly in the best public interest, but they also could not tolerate a disruption of order by an unauthorized message. Law and order seem to go together like love and marriage. Institutions are like that. The church in later centuries became an institutional authority much like the Jewish Sanhedrin, and Christians were just as guilty of uncritical institutional authoritarianism as was the Sanhedrin. This is not a case of Jew vs. Christian. It is about the location of true authority for people of God.

After much discussion, Peter and John were released with a warning to stop preaching. And the Apostles responded: "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." The Jewish court came to a recess. Court was resumed in the next chapter of Acts.

The Apostles continued their ministry. People were healed. The church continued to grow. The Sadducees again were called to action by the high priest. The Apostles were arrested, but this time an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors in the night and "authorized" Peter to stand in the Temple to proclaim the *kerygma*, the preaching of the church about Jesus. They had disobeyed a direct order of silence about Jesus. The Apostles were again arrested and again confronted, and again Peter stated the nature of their civil disobedience: "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (5:29).

In his autobiography, Martin Luther King, Jr., recalled his first exposure to the idea of nonviolent resistance from reading Henry David Thoreau's essay "On Civil Disobedience." Certainly King had read Acts, but the concept and language of *civil disobedience* was coined by Thoreau. Thoreau was a nineteenth century graduate of Harvard and a strict abolitionist. He died in 1862 at the beginning of the Civil War. Thoreau was appalled at the institution of slavery in America. He opposed the Mexican American War because of its extension of slavery into Mexican territory. He advocated *nonviolence* to oppose unjust laws and corrupt government to bring pressure for change. Thoreau's civil disobedience was a refusal to pay taxes to support the evil of slavery. He preferred prison to silence before this injustice.

In reading Thoreau, *King became convinced that non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as cooperation with good.* He revived the principle of civil disobedience in the civil rights movement: "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," according to King, "these are outgrowths of Thoreau's insistence that evil must be resisted and that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice."

King stirred as much hatred and opposition for the cause of racial integration as the Apostles brought out in the Sanhedrin. After all, we had laws. They were called "Jim Crow Laws." They mandated racial segregation and maintained African-American subordination before the white majority in the U.S. King knew he was breaking the law, but he chose the route of nonviolence. He

rejected the revolutionary option of the Black Panthers and other violent groups to meet violence with violence.

We are a law and order church. We do not encourage people to break the law, but is there ever a place where we must take exception to law and order? When I was a small child, my cousin became ill with a throat infection. When she began to have trouble breathing, my aunt called for help, and Mother drove our car down Industrial Boulevard in Houston to get them to a hospital. She violated the speed limit. Then at the Houston Ship Channel, she came upon the only ferry crossing to get to the hospital, she drove illegally down the left lane around the long line of vehicles waiting to board the ferry. At the front of the line, she appealed for help. Everyone involved recognized the emergency, and the child's life was saved. The law had to be set aside. The child's life was more important than speed limits and protocol in ferry boarding.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw the evil of Hitler's Nazi regime and acted in civil disobedience. Like King, he believed that, for a Christian, cooperation with evil is not an option. Christian discipleship requires disobedience before injustice.

Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God. He took exception to the practice of legalism. When people try to write a rule for everything, eventually they hit a situation when no rule applies. Ultimately they must face numerous circumstances when the common understanding of the law must be exceeded for the sake of justice. Jesus was more interested in determining and acting on what is right than in the authorization of action based on "rights."

When Peter cited the controversial name of Jesus, he was not offering a magical incantation that causes the laws of nature to be reversed; he was not claiming to be more important or better qualified to run the world than the Sanhedrin. He was following with consistency the Kingdom—the authority—of God. God rules when the highest good stands above all human authority. Civil disobedience was not the intention, but obedience to the clear will and purpose of God in the world was. Then as now, "we must obey God" above every human authority—so help us God.