

Time to Obey God Rather Than Man

As sons and daughters of God, we are called to honor and respect authority and to be people of obedience rather than people of rebellion. But that means when the earthly authorities tell us to disobey God, we respectfully say, "We must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29).

This was a major theme at the "I Stand Sunday" rally in Houston, where thousands gathered together to pledge their obedience to God and His Word, regardless of cost or consequences.

In doing so, they were standing firmly on biblical principles, following in the footsteps of the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1, Daniel and his compatriots in Daniel 3 and 6, the wise men of Matthew 2, and the apostles in Acts 4 and 5.

Of course, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are peacemakers rather than troublemakers, respectful rather than rude, and we must recognize that without proper authority structures the world could not function. At the same time, because we are called to obey God above all, there are times when we must disobey earthly authorities when their commands violate the commands of God.

In my book *Revolution in the Church*, I addressed this issue in the chapter entitled, "Revolutionary, Not 'Rebelutionary.'"

There I explained that, "If we are to take a stand for truth even when others call us extremists; if we are to refuse to submit to unrighteousness even when pressure mounts on us to compromise; if we are to call for radical change and swim against the tide even at great personal cost – if we are to do these things we must be sure that our motivations are not fleshly, that we are not merely manifesting our own

independence, that we are not simply rebels with a cause.

“Put another way, if you really want to be a Jesus revolutionary, you must crucify rebellion, independence, pride, self-will, ambition, anger, rage, retaliation, and all related carnal behavior. You must cultivate humility, longsuffering, and willingness to bear reproach; you must learn to turn the other cheek and overcome evil through good. The true Jesus revolutionary is a person whose flesh has been nailed to the cross. That is radical!”

Living as a Christian in Communist China, Watchman Nee had to address this issue as well, and he explained that while submission is absolute, obedience is conditional.

In *Revolution in the Church*, I quoted from Nee’s book *Spiritual Authority*, where he wrote: “Submission is a matter of attitude, while obedience is a matter of conduct. Peter and John answered the Jewish religious council: ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you rather than unto God, judge ye’ (Acts 4:19). Their spirit was not rebellious, since they still submitted to those who were in authority.

“Obedience, however, cannot be absolute. Some authorities must be obeyed; while others should not be, especially in matters which touch upon Christian fundamentals – such as believing the Lord, preaching the gospel, and so forth. Children may make suggestions to their parents, yet they must not show an unsubmitive attitude. Submission ought to be absolute. Sometimes obedience is submission, whereas at other times an inability to obey may still be submission.”

He explained: “When delegated authority (men who represent God’s authority) and direct authority (God Himself) are in conflict, one can render submission but not obedience to the delegated authority. Let us summarize this under three points:

1. Obedience is related to conduct: it is relative.

Submission is related to heart attitude: it is absolute.

2. God alone receives unqualified obedience without measure; any person lower than God can only receive qualified obedience.
3. Should the delegated authority issue an order clearly contradicting God's command, he will be given submission but not obedience. We should submit to the person who has received delegated authority from God, but we should disobey the order which offends God."

As a follower of Jesus, I have deep respect for authority, giving honor where it is due and demonstrating respect even in the midst of disagreement. But, with God's grace and help, there is no human being on the planet who is going to stop me from obeying my Lord, regardless of the cost of obedience.

Isn't this simply Discipleship 101? Isn't this what God's people have done through the centuries, defying the edicts of godless kings and rulers and officials?

Benjamin Franklin understood this principle in the Revolutionary War when he coined the phrase, "Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God" – and I would put all my emphasis on those last three words: obedience to God.

As I have taught many times over the years, before you go around saying, "I must obey God rather than man," be sure you have a proven pattern of obedience to man. Otherwise, your words could simply be a cloak for arrogance and self-will.

But when a godly person with a track record of submission says to the authority figure, "I honor and respect you and have always sought to obey you, but because you are requiring me to disobey the Lord, I must disobey you instead," that person is speaking with conviction and power. That person will be backed by heaven.

And what happens when there are serious consequences to our acts of obedience? Using examples from Scripture, Watchman Nee

explained that, "The three friends of Daniel refused to bow to the golden image set up by King Nebuchadnezzar. They disobeyed the king's order, yet they submitted to the king's fire. . . . In disregard of the royal decree Daniel prayed to God; nevertheless he submitted to the king's judgment by being thrown into the lion's den."

To repeat Nee's principle, submission is absolute, obedience is conditional.

Let us, then, as submitted, authority-loving people determine that, come what may, we will obey God rather than man, remembering that disobedience to unbiblical and unrighteous demands is obedience to our King.

Now is the time to take a stand.