# We must obey God rather than human authority

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship  
Will Fitzgerald  
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Acts 5:27-32

5:27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us."

29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. 30 The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

## The Context

Last week we looked at a sermon by Peter ­— and here’s another little one. This time, Peter is talking to a small group of religious leaders, the high council. They had been arrested for preaching because of “jealousy,” the story tells us. But an angel came and freed Peter and other apositles, and they were back at it: they went right to the religious center, the temple, to continue their preaching. They were arrested peacefully and brought up directly in front of the council by the temple police.

By the way, I was thinking: maybe *we* need some temple police. Do you think we could budget for it?

The high priest is angry: how dare they disobey their order to stop preaching. And the high priest is also angry that what they are saying implicated the council in Jesus’s death.

Note: just to be really clear here: the apostles did blame the leaders for Jesus’s death. But they didn’t blame all Jews, and even the high priest’s question doesn’t imply that. There is no place for anti-semitism in a Christian church. Peter, at this point, would very most likely have considered himself primarily as a Jew, who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Note that Peter’s revelation that we discussed last week takes place *after* this incident. I don’t know why the lectionary places things in this order, but they did.

**The Content of Peter’s sermon**

Peter’s sermon though, is similar to the one we discussed last week; it’s much more truncated and pointed towards the Jewish leaders. Jesus was the one raised up by their (common) God, and exalted as Leader and Savior. The goal of this was repentance and forgiveness of sins for Israel. Again, you see it’s very much focused on the people of Israel. By the way, that word for “leader” could be translated as “hero” (or perhaps even “superhero”). And the reason he gives are threefold: (1) the witness the apostles bore to what had happened, and (2) the coming of the Holy Spirit on people (remember, this is soon after Pentecost). And of course, there were the healings and miracies which were the Holy Spirit’s work.

**The reaction**

The reaction of the council was interesting: there was a lot of disagreement of what to do. But Gamaliel (a famous Jew, by the way, who is well attested outside the scriptures) suggest they just let it ride and see what God was doing. His wisdom and moral authority were so great they they agreed to do that, after a little light flogging. (Gamaliel was also one of Paul’s mentors).

**We must obey God, rather than human authority**

I want to spend a few minutes on Peter’s first statement, though, in addressing the high priest’s anger about their disobeying the council. Peter says, simply, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

When, in the past, I have thought about this passage, I have naturally thought about the idea of *civil disobedience*: that is, there are times when we must obey our conscience and break some law. And Peter’s example inspires us to do that. Of course, we don’t go around breaking laws just because. It’s also sound advice that we *seek to live peacably with everyone* and *obey the king* when we can. It’s not that we, as Christians, say there is no human authority we should answer to; we say, as Christians, that there is a higher authority we answer to. And, of course, we recognize that there will be consequences of our actions (in the Acts account; it happens soon: Stephen is arrested, also defends himself before, and preaches to, the high council; but, in his case, he is stoned to death; the first Christian martyr.

So, *civil disobedience* is a way to obey God, rather than human authority.

But I think about to whom Peter is talking: he is not talking to the representatives of the Roman government, but the religous establishment. I will grant you they they had very little concept of the separation of church and state, of course. But it reminds me that religous authority also derives from God, and when it deviates, we need to obey God rathan than human authority.

This takes a lot of discernment, of course, and I am not saying it’s an easy thing; we are pretty likely to miss the mark ourselves. (Peter, at this point, for example, seems to think the good news is for Jews only; he had some learning to do).

Martin Luther King, in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” chides his fellow clergymen for calling his activities "unwise and untimely." With the wisdom of hindsight, we can see that King’s activities were both very wise and very timely, and resulted in great good. King’s letter, by the way, is a very cogent argument about why he needed to engage in *civil disobedience*; it’s very much worth reading. But he was also engaged in what we might call *ecclesiastical disobedience* by publically calling out his religious detractors.

Take a minute and think if there are any other spheres of activity in which we are called to obey God rather than human authority.

As you do that, let me mention one more that I thought about. Every day, we are bombarded with commands to *buy, buy, buy* and find our personal value from the things we possess. I think God often calls us to *economic disobedience* by asking us to use our resources to help others, to win friends, to help in the healing of the world and the expanding of God’s kingdom.

Have you thought of anything else?

So, I have a small spiritual exercise for you this week: Plan to engage in small act of disobedience to human authority and obedience to God. I look forward to hearing what happens! And I have a “get into jail free” card, so I will visit you in County if I need to!