

A Conversation on Civil Disobedience

Jeff Purswell and Eric Turbedsky

The following is an edited transcript of the audio

Eric Turbedsky:

Jeff, thanks for being on the call with me. For those watching, my name's Eric Turbedsky. I serve as the director of church planting for Sovereign Grace Churches. Jeff serves as the director of theology, and together we serve on the leadership team, which is what sparked our conversation today, because I wish I could bring my friends along with me that they would enjoy what I've enjoyed during this pandemic, as it has drug on and my list of questions keeps growing longer. So, Jeff, grateful for your counsel, your leadership, and especially when we are in uncharted theological issues, particularly for Americans, such as the one I have for you today, to discuss today, and that is civil disobedience. So, help us out, Jeff.

Jeff Purswell:

What a topic.

Eric Turbedsky:

Yeah. Civil disobedience. Help us all out, my friends, and all the guys in Sovereign Grace Churches. Let me throw out a first question here. Here it is.

Jeff Purswell:

Let me just say this. For any guy who's joining us, any of our pastors, I never want to start without thanking you men, what you do, and how you serve. And we're going to kick around this idea a bit. It's not an easy one. Stakes are high, and we also realize there's, as with everything these days, there's a lot of controversy swirling. So, as much as possible, we want to think together and just be as principled and as Biblical and as Christ honoring as we can be, as we seek to serve our folks. So, hopefully, this will help a bit.

Eric Turbedsky:

Yeah. And this is what I've experienced, Jeff, as we've gotten on leadership team calls. So, first question. Just give me a general review, the role of the state. Why the state or the government, why does it exist?

Jeff Purswell:

Yes. Role of the state. Well, okay. We could go for a few hours here, but we'll try to make it brief. I think our guys will know, scripture is clear. The state, the human government, is a gift from God, and that's where you have to start. And it's not just a gift. It's appointed by God to accomplish some of his purposes in the world. So, it's not something that we should dismiss. It's not a necessary evil. It's something that God has given us, a common-grace structure that God uses. And when we talk about those roles, those purposes, that the state accomplishes, foremost among those, I suppose, would be establishing and preserving justice. You see that at the very first hint of human government in Genesis 9, in the command to Noah where murder is to be punished. That's not given merely to Israel as a theocracy. That's given at the very foundation of the reestablishment of human society.

So, it's an important text. You see it in the classic text, which I'm sure we're all thinking about these days on civil authorities, Romans 13, where governing authorities are to punish wrongdoing and to encourage good conduct. So, civil authority plays an important role in securing, administering justice, maintaining a social order in keeping with the just standards of God's law.

But one thing I want to point out, though, is, you also see in Romans 13, that phrase, "The ruler is God's servant for your good." And I think that implies another aspect of the state's role in promoting the common good, the wellbeing of society, to care for the common interests and general welfare of the people over which that government has authority, which certainly includes protecting the lives of its citizens. So, that's important because I think the government's role is more than just restraining sin. And that would be the view of some who would say, "Well, human government came about only as a result of the fall." I don't think so. I think the foundation of government you see in the creation mandate in Genesis 1 and 2, there was going to be a need for a structure to play a role in the beneficial ordering of society. And so, I think the government plays that role.

So, bottom line, it's appointed by God. It has authority from God over the people that it serves, and that authority is given for the good of people to maintain justice and to promote the wellbeing of society. So, I think that pretty much sums it up.

Eric Turbedsky:

Our attitude, then, towards the government and the state would generally be a disposition of gratefulness?

Jeff Purswell:

Yeah. I think that's a great follow-up question. General posture should be gratefulness. I think when you look back to Romans 13, that the general posture of the Christian towards the state is an outflow of that recognition of the government being from God is one of - the word that Paul uses is submission. He says it in Romans 13. Peter uses it in his first letter. They use the same verb, "Let everyone be subject to the government authorities." So, we're to have an attitude of submission to the government because, as Paul reasons in Romans 13, they are appointed by God. God has delegated to the magistrate the degree of authority. And to oppose them, as Paul goes on to say, is to oppose what God has appointed.

Because of the responsibilities God has entrusted to the state, they play an important role in his purposes. So, we're to recognize that, be grateful for that, and relate to them within that understanding,

Eric Turbedsky:

Would it be fair to generally characterize our relationship with the state as Christians and say, "Well, it's similar to the way a husband and wife relate, parents and children, employer, employee"? The idea of the gratefulness, obedience, leadership, submission. Are there any distinctions between the state and those that you'd make?

Jeff Purswell:

No, I think that's a fair analogy, especially when you look at different spheres of authority within the culture, and you do see in church history, some people speaking in those terms. The government is to have a paternal - and I don't mean that in a negative sense that it's often used - but a paternal regard for the wellbeing of those under its charge, and those in its charge are to relate and to support that kind of leadership. Obviously, there's differences, of course. It's interesting that Paul doesn't say - and I don't think this is pressing his words too much or extracting too much from his words - he doesn't say in an unqualified way, "Obey governing authorities." Oh, he does add obey, I should say, in Titus 3, and to be subject to them certainly implies that.

So, I think in a general way, we are to obey governing authorities and observe laws, fulfill our responsibilities, pay our taxes, et cetera. But their authority, as we've said, comes from God, that they are his servants, which means one of the ways we obey God

is to obey civil authorities. So, their authority is real. Sometimes you hear authority spoken of as if "Well, if we agree or if we want to, then we obey, but it's not real authority." No, it's real authority, but it's qualified authority. An authentic authority, we could say, but not an absolute authority. That, of course, belongs only to God, and our ultimate allegiance is to him. And so, as much as our attitude is one of submission, which typically implies obedience, we can never allow allegiance to the government to displace our allegiance to God and his word. And perhaps we'll talk in a moment about when our responsibility to obey ends...

Eric Turbedsky:

Yeah. I just want to say that for all my friends, as we've been wrestling with this issue, talking about this issue as a pastoral team, I just often, when I hear some arguments, I say, "Well, just don't tell my kids to think like that." They're called to obey their parents, and not say, "Well, I don't really like what you're doing. So, I disagree with it, so I'm going to do something different because I follow Jesus." It's a qualified authority. Give me the where and if state authority, government authority, civic authority, and church authority, how do those relate? Do they ever overlap? How do the two engage one another? We have multiple authorities, and the classic being family, church and state as three spheres.

Jeff Purswell:

And in the reformed tradition, education and commerce, et cetera. Now we get to the fun parts, the complexities. The short answer is yes, they do overlap. And behind this is the reality that, as you mentioned, God has established in human society different spheres of responsibility and authority. Many of our guys would be familiar with Kuyper, Abraham Kuyper, who, he expanded on what you could call Calvin's two powers view, and it was Kuyper who spoke of sphere sovereignty, meaning there are different spheres in society. So, as you mentioned, state and church and family and business and education, et cetera. Each has its own right to exist, each plays its own role, and each has the authority to fulfill its role. They interact. They're interdependent in certain ways, but no one sphere should usurp the authority of another sphere.

But Kuyper allowed - and I think this is right - that because of the state's particular role, its authority can at times be elevated a bit over the others in order to fulfill its responsibilities because of its role. So, one of its roles is to prevent one sphere from dominating another. And so, obviously then its authority gets exercised. Or one of its roles is to prevent the authority within one sphere from acting wrongly towards those under his authority. Collecting taxes is another one. Everyone's paying taxes, and that's to enable it to maintain the wellbeing of society.

Jeff Purswell:

So, yes. But because of the nature of its role, its authority is sometimes elevated to fulfill that role. Not to usurp the authority, but to help it fulfill its role. And I do think, I mean, if we think about what's going on now, one of those moments is, principally, when it's acting for the health and wellbeing of the community.

So during this COVID-19 virus... Well, I'll say this... While this didn't justify everything various authorities are doing, the principle of the government acting to protect public health does fall within its responsibility to protect those under its authority. Now, I want to add, and I'm sure we're all aware of this, there've certainly been policies and restrictions imposed in certain places that are problematic at best. Inconsistent messages sent by the government. "This is true about the virus now. Oh, it's no longer true. We've learned"... That makes it challenging. Obviously, there's been, in some places, inconsistent and therefore unjust perhaps, restrictions, bizarre determinations of what qualifies as essential or nonessential.

Again, so, civil authorities do have the responsibility to act, the authority to act, for the public health. But that doesn't mean all those actions are all just, et cetera. But again, back to your question, yes. The authority of those spheres do overlap, including the authority of the state, in certain circumstances.

Eric Turbedsky:

So, okay. So, then to draw the proverbial line, what are the principles in which, for the sake of this discussion on civil disobedience, where civil authorities need to be counteracted with ecclesiastical authority?

Jeff Purswell:

Well, the basic principle is fairly straightforward. We'll start from there, where to be submissive to authorities? In most cases, obey the laws of authorities, unless that obedience means disobedience to God and his word. So, we are not to obey the state if that means we're disobeying a command of God. God is our ultimate authority, of course. Our ultimate allegiance is to him. And there's plenty of examples of that in scripture. Most prominently, perhaps, you see the apostles in Acts 4 and then particularly 5 telling the authorities, "We must obey God rather than men." Now, they don't say, "We only obey God. We don't obey men." That's not what they say. They say, "We must obey God rather than men." In other words, in that situation, the two authorities were at odds. The Sanhedrin's command directly contradicted God's command. So, they had no choice. They had to disobey and they had to face the consequences.

Jeff Purswell:

And of course, we could multiply examples from scripture. The Hebrew midwives saving the children that were to be drowned, Daniel and his friends, et cetera. And so, we view the government's authority in light of God's ultimate authority, and we view the government's demands or regulations in light of the demands of God's word. And if the state demands something that would lead us to disobey God, we are obligated to disobey. So, what does that mean now? Well-

Eric Turbedsky:

Now apply it.

Jeff Purswell:

Well, in our current circumstances, that's what pastors have to determine. Given the - and you have to factor this in - given the extraordinary nature of this moment, are the regulations or restrictions that we're facing - and we're facing different ones- but are those that we're facing a reasonable, appropriate application of the church's responsibility to protect its citizens, whether we think they're getting it right or not? And if so, we should comply. We should submit to the authorities' request.

Or are these regulations, are they an unrighteous, inappropriate attempt by the government to usurp control over the church's doctrine, practice, or mission? So, by complying, are we being, by definition, unfaithful to God? By complying, are we clearly disobeying God's word? And I'd want to say, appropriately interpreted, disobeying God's word to us. That's the determination pastors face.

The church, throughout its history, has recognized that sometimes there are extenuating circumstances, extraordinary circumstances, that the church is in. And so, for instance... And this is just one that I'll just mention, because it's so obvious. Hebrews 10 says, "Don't forsake the gathering of yourselves together." And so, we should never, ever not have a Sunday meeting. Well, that is just a ham-fisted application of that that doesn't recognize extraordinary circumstances. It kind of takes the text a little bit out of context in terms... I mean, Sunday meetings, it certainly applies to that, but that's not the direct issue that the writer of Hebrews is addressing there.

But we could say, "Well, we're not meeting in this particular moment, given the extraordinary nature of this. There are regulations in place that are reasonable. We're not disobeying God by complying with them, and we're also obeying other scriptural principles as well." We are seeking to not only obey the state, unless it causes us to

disobey God. Well, does it seem we're disobeying God? We're not being unfaithful to him. We are seeking to love our neighbors as well. So, those are the cluster of questions that pastors face. That's the determination that we all have to make.

Eric Turbedsky:

Well, Jeff, one of the concerns I have, or at least questions that I've batted around is, is there any place where I can say the church illegitimately... unjustly might not be the right word... illegitimately assumes authority that is actually preserved for the state? And in particular, thinking here, as a pastoral team in Orange, I've heard lots of guys (not ours) say that we're not infectious disease experts. And so, when do I decide what public health decision should be made and measure should be taken or not taken?

Jeff Purswell:

Yeah, that's an excellent question, Eric. If you go back to the relationship of the spheres... I mean, obviously, our ultimate allegiance is to God. We obey God. However, we recognize that we can, because we're under certain structures, common-grace structures, we're under other authorities, one of the ways we obey God is to obey those authorities. One of the ways my sons obey God is to obey me. So, those things aren't at odds. So, the government has a role. Civil authorities have a role in protecting public health. That falls under their purview. It does not fall to the pastor purview. And so, I think you put your finger exactly on a situation where a pastor, a pastoral team, an ecclesiastical authority, could usurp the role of a civil magistrate to arrogate to himself, to itself, the determination of how the public's health is to be protected.

And so, if I'm a pastor making a decision, I would want my decision to be... Let's say I conclude, my team concludes, that we should disobey these regulations. To obey them is to disobey God. To obey them is to be unfaithful. To obey them is to submit to the state rather than to God. That is the decision I want to be making. What I don't want to be making is my determination about this particular public health threat is X, therefore I'm to do Y. In the face of COVID-19, it's not my role to determine how much of a threat I think that virus is. I may read a lot. I may have a pretty good sense. I may think that the government authorities might be getting something wrong or might be misjudging issues, but it's really not my role to step into that and say, "I know the dimensions of this threat. I know the public policy implications of this particular virus, and so therefore I'm going to make my decision based on that." I think that's stepping outside of our authority there.

Eric Turbedsky

Yeah. I really appreciate it when someone asks me the question, "So, what do you think?" And I appreciate that because underneath that is, say, from a member of my church, a trust and a relationship and care, and so coming and asking... but I need to say, "I think I'm the wrong guy. You're asking the wrong guy about COVID. I don't know," though it is a little bit of a sticky wicket to try to figure out where that meshes up with what the church is doing.

Jeff Purswell:

And again, I just want to say there, when I'm saying that, I'm not saying that whatever the government authorities tell us to do, we should always do, regardless, because again, I just don't want to be misunderstood. There can be ungodly regulations that do lead us into disobedience, and different pastoral teams face different things. Regulations are going to differ. Situations are going to differ. I just would encourage us all, we have to make those determinations and the contours of our decision have to be given to us by scripture and our responsibilities to God and his word, not our assessment of the social health context.

Eric Turbedsky:

Yeah. I got one more question for you, but just as a comment, I've been really struck with the weight in scripture of gratefulness and submission to civil authorities and things like that juxtaposed against, you might, say the last pictures of civil authorities, state and worldly authorities in Revelation... You got Romans 13. You got Revelation 13, you got the beast devouring and pursuing the church. And so, obviously, there is a place to draw a line, so to speak, to disobey. So, and with that in mind, last question. Should Sovereign Grace Churches as a family, a global family of churches, should we have an official position? Should we take official positions on when to civilly disobey? And maybe even narrow it down to the United States, what's going on in the US, or maybe even a region, as we're broken down into regions or presbyteries. Should we have official positions? "On this one, let's disobey. On this one, let's obey"?

Jeff Purswell:

Yeah. I don't think so. I really don't think so, and I don't think we can. And I appreciate, guys, and I have been approached... Guys are wondering, looking for counsel, looking for guidance. I mean, most obviously, not every state or municipality has the same restriction. I mean, that's the beauty of federalism. Some states are more restrictive, others less so. And so, it obviously would be wrongheaded, I think, for the leadership team, for instance, to try to counsel a single approach to restrictions when different churches face such different circumstances. The restrictions are different, and, I would

add, the settings are different. Some restrictions are more modest, some less so, some reasonable, some more questionable.

Jeff Purswell:

And then we're in different situations. Some churches have their own facilities. Many do not. We here in Louisville, we don't have our own facilities. And so, we are following our landlord's guidance. And if we want to stay in the facility, we're obviously going to be good guests and maintain a good witness.

I would also say, churches have different relationships within their community, a different profile, which means the example they set with their decisions will be different from other churches. Each church has not only to consider, I think, what is right, but when that's not altogether clear, what is wise, what is best for their congregation, and also what is best for their witness in the community. What are they signaling about their posture towards the community by that particular decision? And that's not the only decision. It's not the only factor, but I think it's an important one.

Eric Turbedsky:

And conscience comes into play as well.

Jeff Purswell:

Absolutely. Yes, absolutely. I'd just add... Related to that, at least at the moment, another reason we wouldn't do this is that the nature of what churches are facing is different, and this gets back to that core consideration for any pastor or a pastoral team. Do the government restrictions in a particular locale constitute a fundamental contradiction of scriptural imperatives for the church? I have no idea... I know a little bit about what you're facing in California, but I don't know all of the dimensions of that. I haven't followed it. I'm not studying it. And so, I wouldn't presume to speak about what you're facing. But are they a contradiction? And therefore, does going along with those restrictions constitute sin on the part of the church? Does it constitute a compromise of God's word, a compromise of the gospel?

Now, obviously we can and we are, we're talking with each other about these things, processing these things together, but bottom line, it would be impossible, and I think wrong, to fashion a single policy for our entire family of churches. We would not presume to do that, as much as we want to serve everyone in thinking through these things.

Eric Turbedsky:

In my context here, the mandate to only assemble outdoors, and prohibition on indoors, just 20 miles away is, in essence, a sentence to not gather together at all, as you get into the desert or along the coast. Actually, I hear folks in our church saying they prefer this. "Can we just stay outside indefinitely?" Our children's ministry is all-year-round outdoor ministry. So, we just shouldered out the children. The children lost their ministry space. So, it works for us. Might not work for someone just 20, 30 miles away from me, and then the mandate takes on a whole new flavor.

Jeff Purswell:

So, you would say, then, would you say that it's affected the form of your meetings, but it hasn't affected your ability to meet or your right to meet, at least so far? Would that be what you're facing, then?

Eric Turbedsky:

Generally, yes. And I understand that even someone down the street from us... There is a historic Lutheran church down the street from us that has members in the thousands. There isn't anywhere they can socially distance outdoors. So, generally, yes, for us, just adjusting and affecting our form. The restrictions for some have been quite enjoyable, to be outside on a Sunday morning. That would be very different in Louisville in the fall or in the winter. And so, good luck with all you trying to go out to eat. All our outdoor dining is fine all year round. I don't know what you guys are going to do in the Midwest, in the United States.

Jeff Purswell:

And it just occurs to me, when you start thinking about down the road, I think we all need to realize, too, and I'm sure we do, but this thing has been such a dynamic situation that has changed our understanding... The virus has changed, directions that we get from government authorities has changed. We're in a very political moment, with a presidential election coming on. I think a pastor can take heart that, okay, as I think about these issues in light of scripture, I need to make a decision now. That doesn't obligate me down the road for whatever... Is this a slippery slope that a decision later is inevitably going to mirror what I do now? That's a difficult question, but I think in general, no.

I mean, I think we can make a decision right now. Circumstances change. I don't think that hinders us from making a different decision. Again, that could vary, based on your situation. So, I guess, back to that policy question you asked, and should we say something... I would really want to honor a local church's and the local pastorate's

assessment of their situation, their weighing of Biblical commands in light of that, their weighing of their responsibility to obey government authorities, given what they're facing, given the nature of those restrictions. It's not an easy decision to make, necessarily. Perhaps it's going to get even more dicey. It's certainly going to get more dicey on certain fronts, whether it's a virus or something else. So, our policy would be, then, do we have a policy? Yes. We want to support every church as much as possible to make as godly, as wise, and as courageous a decision that best honors Christ and best serves their people as they can at this particular moment.

Eric Turbedsky:

Yeah. Amen. Amen. Okay, this has been really helpful, Jeff. Thanks. Thanks so much for allowing me to record our conversation, our call. That way, some of our friends can enjoy it as well and benefit from it as well. If you're watching this video, you're a Sovereign Grace pastor. Again, I just want to say what Jeff said right at the beginning, repeat it, just that we're so grateful for you men, eager to watch the Lord work in and through you even during this, what I don't think is an unprecedented time. It might be for our generation, but nothing new under the sun. May the Lord give you wisdom and peace as you follow the Lord and lead your churches. Thanks again, Jeff. God bless.

Jeff Purswell:

Thanks, Eric. I appreciate it.