

THE ETHICS OF PLANTING CHURCHES IN MUSLIM LANDS

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I. INTRODUCTION

It has been nearly two thousand years since our Lord uttered those famous last words of His earthly ministry that we now call “the Great Commission.” First century culture contributed to the rejection of that message as both the religious leaders of the day and the government systems condemned the teaching of Jesus. Potential barriers to the gospel have not changed throughout the centuries. Even now, all nations have not been recipients of the gospel teaching of our Lord, therefore the Great Commission must still be in effect for the Church today.

1.1 “Closed” Countries?

Government opposition has remained one of the primary hindrances to global evangelization since the inception of the Church. This year there is an estimated six billion people worldwide and almost two billion of those people have little or no access to the gospel, primarily because their governments forbid Christian evangelism.¹ Among those nations are the Islamic strongholds which consider Christian missionaries to be “agents of the U.S.” who are attempting to undermine their religio-political power structures. A few decades ago, those countries were considered “closed” to Christian workers because of such rigid constraints, but more recently that view has been challenged.

1.2 The New Wave of Church Planting

Today, there exists a new wave of Christians who are overcoming the so-called barriers of non-cooperative nations through a process known as church planting. Traditional missionaries may not be allowed, but as Doug Priest, Jr. has noted, “they (Muslim countries) are open to the bi-vocational missionary role. It is preferable to refer to such nations as ‘creative access’ or ‘restricted access’ countries.”² With this change of

¹ Status of global evangelization map, 1996.

² Doug Priest, Jr., *The Gospel Unhindered*. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1994), 149.

perspective, the challenge of what was formerly believed to be closed to the gospel is now being engaged by Christian workers intent on fulfilling the Great Commission.

1.3 The Quandary

By entering such countries on a work visa, the legal barrier has been overcome; however, a potential ethical barrier has been raised. Scripture clearly tells Christians that they must obey their governing authorities, which causes some to put a halt on the Great Commission. What do we make of such a quandary? Must we violate scripture in order to evangelize against the will of Islamic governments? Must we violate scripture in order to remain submissive to governing authorities, thereby neglecting the Great Commission?

1.4 Thesis Statement

It is the purpose of this paper to address this potential ethical quandary by proving that *church planting within the context of Muslim countries that forbid Christian evangelism does not constitute sinful civil disobedience or deception, but is rather supported by Holy Scripture and thus constitutes a divine right.*

II. WHAT CONSTITUTES CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE?

In determining how Christians should respond to the “ethical quandary” of evangelization in Muslim countries, it is first necessary to establish exactly what Christian Ethicists mean when they refer to civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is commonly defined as, “the nonviolent, public violation of some law or policy, as an act of conscience, to protest the injustice of the law or policy and (in most cases) to effect or prevent change in the law or policy.”³ It is true that most Christians would like for the Islamic states of North Africa and Asia to remove restrictions prohibiting open mission work in their countries; however, it should be understood that political reform is not our primary objective. The “covert” missionaries who are currently working in such countries are not to be confused with those who would gather with signs protesting laws

³ David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, *Readings in Christian Ethics*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 423.

in a country that is not their own. Many missionaries in the past have strayed from their original purpose into the political arena, but for the purposes of this paper, the primary objective of the Christian missionary is the fulfillment of the Great Commission in a manner consistent with scripture. Thus, the common definition for civil disobedience may only apply in part to evangelism in restricted-access countries.

2.1 Pertinent Scripture

Scripture provides clear information on how the Christian is to respond to government. It is always most helpful to find situations in the scripture that most resemble that which we face today, and then make our decisions accordingly. For this reason, we turn first to Romans 13:1-2, which addresses the Christian's responsibility to political authorities. Here, the apostle Paul states, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established . . . consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted." Thus, submissiveness to governing authorities is equated with submissiveness to God. J. Robertson McQuilkin notes that, "When Paul instructed the believers in Rome to obey the government, he was not speaking of a just and benevolent government. Caligula and Nero were two of the most depraved madmen ever to exercise despotic rule over people. And the Christians themselves were the object of their vitriolic hatred."⁴ Does this mean that Christians are to disobey God in one area in order to obey him in another? The apostle Peter also spoke on the matter in 1 Peter 2:13-14 including the purpose of governing authorities as, "sent by Him (God) to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." Taking these two scriptures together, some conclude that unconditional submission is necessary. However, there are some qualifications that an authority must possess to establish its scriptural legitimacy. A look into a more specific instance yields some hermeneutical guidelines that might be helpful. In Acts 5:27-29, the apostles appear before the Sanhedrin under charges of preaching the gospel against specific orders. In verse 29, Peter and the other apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men!" Here we find an express instance of disobedience to

⁴ J. Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1989), p. 475.

authority on the part of Christian believers. However, many argue that the Sanhedrin were not political authorities, but false teachers, thereby justifying the apostles' stance. Culturally, the Sanhedrin would have been equated with political leaders since they were a recognized authority, even by the Roman Empire.

Do the guidelines found in Romans and 1 Peter conflict with the events of Acts? Looking further at the Romans passage seems to indicate that there is no conflict. In Romans 10:3, Paul states that "Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil." Therefore, we can conclude that so long as a governing authority upholds what is good, as defined by God, then that authority is to be obeyed. Conversely, "We must not confuse civil authority with God's will. We have a right, and duty, to exercise that which God instructs, even if it violates man's law."⁵

2.2 Pertinent Literature

One of the most influential Christian thinkers of our day, Francis Schaeffer, has noted that all earthly authority is delegated by God and is thus, in no way autonomous.⁶ The leaders of Islamic nations may rule under God's permissive will, but their leadership, like that of our own political figures, is going to be affected by their innate depravity. Schaeffer points to the instance in Matthew 22:21 where Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," emphasizing the fact that Caesar's authority is obviously much less than that of our Creator.⁷ If God is our Creator, then everything is essentially His! Jesus was essentially saying that Caesar could have human wealth, for it was insignificant in the Kingdom of God; whereas, people are infinitely valuable, as displayed in the purpose of the cross. In light of the infinite value of humans, the Great Commission, possessing eternal significance, would most certainly override any restriction on evangelism imposed by a Muslim government.

Understanding that God's specific commands supercede those in earthly positions of authority means that they will, at times, conflict with one another. The Feinbergs settle the issue by stating that, "On some occasions, civil disobedience is not only morally

⁵ Tom White and Steven Cleary, "The Smuggler," *Voice of the Martyrs*, October 1998, p. 5.

⁶ Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*. (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1981), 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

permissible but even obligatory. Specifically, it is proper when a Christian is asked to do something directly contrary to the revealed will of God and thus contrary to the dictates of moral conscience.”⁸ There are numerous precedents set forth in scripture proving that when the authority of God and man conflict, it is always mandatory to follow God. It is quite obvious that the prohibition of Christian evangelism based upon Sharia law (Islamic rule) is in direct conflict with God’s purpose of restoring mankind from every nation to Himself through the gospel message. Samuel Rutherford’s commentary known as Lex Rex labels such unscriptural law as satanic tyranny and commends those who honor God through civil disobedience.⁹

2.3 Sanctified Civil Disobedience

In light of the pertinent scripture and literature on the subject, it could be argued that church planting in restricted-access countries is not only justified in spite of opposition, but should be the norm for Christians. It is only when Christians are willing to defy tyrannical law that such legislation will be scrutinized. Such civil disobedience will be met with opposition and Christians today cannot expect any more than those of the first century where imprisonment and torture were the common punishment. However, if Tertullian was right in saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,” then our sacrifice will only serve to fulfill the Great Commission. When Christians are brought before the authorities, another ethical question is bound to arise: how much information must we divulge and still remain truthful?

III. WHAT CONSTITUTES LYING AND DECEPTION?

The Bible consistently portrays God as a God of truth. Titus 1:2 indicates that God cannot lie. Understanding Christians to be imitators of God, we have an obligation to be truthful in all of our dealings as well. John Murray writes of the sanctity of truth saying that, “He is the God of truth and all truth derives its sanctity from him. This is

⁸ John S. and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics For a Brave New World*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993), 401.

⁹ Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex: or the Law and the Prince*. (1644).

why all untruth and falsehood is wrong; it is a contradiction of that which God is.”¹⁰ The bi-vocational nature of church planting in Islamic countries will almost certainly stir up the curiosity of the locals and often that curiosity manifests itself in the form of an interrogation. Divulging the wrong information could drastically undermine church planting efforts. Therefore, it is necessary to be truthful by scriptural standards without bringing the whole of the work accomplished under the condemnation of authorities.

3.1 Pertinent Scripture

The most often cited scripture concerning God’s mandate for truthfulness is found in the Decalogue. Exodus 20:16 states, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” Unfortunately, this scripture is usually taken out of context and applied to general truthfulness. Taken correctly, this mandate becomes the foundation of the Jewish justice system, not a moral principle in everyday conversations. The testimony referred to is that of a witness in a court of law, in which case truthfulness is a must so that justice can prevail.¹¹

There are other scriptures that lend greater insight for the situation that missionaries deal with in Muslim countries. For example, in Exodus 1:15-21 the Hebrew midwives are faced with a command from the king of Egypt that is in opposition with all that they knew about God. When told to kill all of the male children of the Hebrews, the midwives lied to the king of Egypt and disobeyed his direct orders out of their fear of God. A similar passage is found in Joshua 2 where Rahab is questioned as to the whereabouts of the Hebrew spies, and she responded with a blatant lie in order to protect them. It seems that in both of these passages, God blessed the women in spite of their dishonesty with earthly kings. Their purpose in lying was to physically protect the work of God through His servants. Can it follow then, that Christian missionaries should protect the work of God for the eternal purpose of evangelism? In Hebrews 11, commonly referred to as “the Hall of Fame of Faith,” we find over and over instances of people who disobeyed earthly authority in order to obey God and their disobedience is

¹⁰ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1957), 125.

¹¹ McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics*. 424.

implied as acting on faith. There Rahab is commended for hiding the spies, which would be considered deception; and then in James 2:25, she is called righteous because of her faith as evidenced in lying and deception! This may present a problem for many Westerners today who have been culturally imbibed with a standard for truth as being the highest virtue, but we should be careful not to hold our cultural standards higher than God's own standards.

3.2 Pertinent Literature

Murray attacks the Western cultural standard for truth with what he sees as the biblical standard. In terms of truth and lies, he sees the ultimate truth to be the redemptive nature of the gospel and the ultimate lie to be the rejection of that truth. His scriptural basis for this standard is found in 1 John 2:22 which says, "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ." Murray comments, "Where this central tenet of the truth of the gospel is disbelieved, there the lie is enthroned."¹²

Later, Murray refers to Samuel's deception of Saul (1 Samuel 16) as "divine authorization for concealment by means of a statement other than that which would have disclosed the main purpose of Samuel's visit to Jesse."¹³ It is interesting to note that Samuel received instructions on what to say directly from the Lord. Samuel, in fact, fulfilled two purposes in his journey. He anointed David and performed a sacrifice. His concealment of the one purpose cannot, therefore, be constituted as sinful because it was the God of truth who instructed him to do so.

The implications of these two conclusions for church planting in restricted-access countries are important. First of all, the Islamic governments that act as authorities deny the truth of the gospel of Christ, which negates their rights to rule over those who do possess the truth of the gospel for they are "anti-Christ." The Sharia law is based upon a horrendous lie, that Jesus is not the Christ, thus mandating sanctified civil disobedience. Secondly, the intent of those Islamic governments to deny the truth to its people cannot survive in light of God's judgment on Saul. Samuel feared Saul's retribution for anointing David as king, but God commanded that he do it for Saul's authority was no

¹² Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 130.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

longer binding. To prevent Saul from destroying the truth that Samuel possessed, God allowed him to conceal information about his mission. Islamic governments would like nothing more than to destroy Christian evangelistic influence in their countries. As agents of the truth, Christian missionaries have been sent to deliver that truth to people within those countries. God has also given us other reasons to enter those countries by making most of them needy of western skills and humanitarian aid. Thus, when faced with the question, “Why are you going there?” God has granted the bi-vocational missionary a way to remain truthful without revealing so much that the entire mission is endangered.

Finnis’ interpretation of Augustine’s treatise on lying opposes such implications. He notes that, “There are some things . . . which are clearly wrong and may not be done, not for any plea of good cause, for any seeming good end, for any supposedly good intention.”¹⁴ But was Augustine truly saying that obedience to God, as a motive, provided no justification? If God specifically told Samuel to withhold truth from Saul, then to fail to do so would have been sin.

3.3 What Information Must We Divulge?

God has specifically told Christians that it is their responsibility to spread the gospel throughout the earth and failure to do so constitutes sin! McQuilkin notes that, “God Himself does not tell the whole truth. He tells us only that portion of the truth which is necessary for our good.”¹⁵ Thus, in some situations it seems that our cultural conditioning concerning hidden agendas, half-truths, evasive answers, and secrets may actually run contrary to scripture. We must not hold the church planter to a stricter standard than God does. To do so is Pharasaism.

¹⁴ John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and Truth*. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1991), 65.

¹⁵ McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics*. 430.

IV. IS IT ALL IN HOW YOU LOOK AT IT?

Church planting in a Muslim country involves two commands of God which may sometimes seemingly run contrary to one another; therefore, we must seek a way to make godly decisions in light of such an understanding. Christian ethicist, Norman Geisler, has divided decision-making into four primary categories: hierarchialism, situationism, ideal absolutism, and non-conflicting absolutism.¹⁶ By briefly examining these categories, it is possible to understand the various points of view concerning the potential Quandry posed by church planting in restricted-access countries.

4.1 The Hierarchialist View

Hierarchialism is the belief that there are a multitude of norms, all of which are universal, with some taking priority over others. According to this position, the Feinbergs state that, “When norms conflict (and they will), one must determine which is the higher rule and obey it. If one does this, he commits no sin by breaking the lower norm.”¹⁷ Applying this view to the Quandry at hand results in the admission that honesty and obedience are commanded by God, but the eternal destiny of souls far outweighs the necessity of obedience to a tyrannical government or honesty during an interrogation by them. According to the hierarchialist, there is no doubt about the differing values of the conflicting norms and thus the Christian responsibility to evangelize the nations takes precedence.

4.2 The Situationist View

The situationist believes that the one universal norm is love. Therefore, in their opinion, that which shows the most love to the most people is the right thing to do.¹⁸ Applying this theory to our Quandry yields a similar response. Knowing the potential of the gospel, which is love in its highest form, Christians have the obligation to share it

¹⁶ Norman Geisler, *Ethics: Issues and Alternatives*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

¹⁷ Feinbergs, *Ethics for A Brave New World*. 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

with all nations so that as many people as possible have the opportunity to respond. As for lying and sanctified civil disobedience, these may not reflect love to those few who are recipients, but the benefits for the people of restricted-access countries far out-weighs the harm done.

4.3 The Ideal Absolutist View

This particular theory differs from the previous two in that there are many conflicting universal norms. In cases where they conflict and the Christian decides to choose a particular action over the other, in essence, he is choosing one sin rather than the other.¹⁹ According to this theory, lying to authorities or disobedience to their laws is indeed sinful, thus necessitating repentance. Thus, the church planter is faced with the option of two sins: failure to obey the direct command of our Lord in the Great Commission, or living as a full-time hypocrite in order to obey. In light of the addendum that Christ's blood is sufficient for forgiveness of the believer, this view seems to support church planting as well because those the Christian is attempting to reach in restricted countries have not yet received Christ, and thus have no hope of forgiveness unless evangelized.

4.4 The Non-conflicting Absolutist View

This final theory agrees that there exist many universal ethical norms; however, it differs in that it proposes that at no time can any two of these norms conflict with one another.²⁰ Applying this view means that there is no Quandry at all. The fact that God has commanded Christians to spread the gospel and yet be submissive to authorities acting only truthfully need not pose a problem. In fact, most cases of evangelism found in the New Testament involved the condemnation of the Roman government and the punishment of the Christian. In other words, if a church planter preaches against that will of the host government, it seems that no sin against God has been committed. However, when they were caught and questioned, they always responded truthfully accepting punishment at the hands of the earthly rulers. Could it be that God might be calling on

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Christians to obey Him in evangelizing the world, including those restricted-access countries, with the willingness to endure persecution at the hands of those tyrannical governments? If that be the case, then this theory could be the accurate way to view the situation.

V. CHURCH PLANTING STRATEGIES

Church planting in restricted-access countries is by no means a product of twentieth century missiology. The first century Church was made up of church planters who spread the gospel message throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Livingstone notes the continuity of the discipline:

“The paradigm in the book of Acts involves several people working together to enter into a given city, become significant trusted residents or sponsored guests, and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ as change agents, then making disciples whose supreme loyalty is to Christ, and enabling these new believers to assemble together to represent Christ in that area as his ambassadors.”²¹

5.1 Tentmaking

The apostle Paul set the precedent for bi-vocational missionaries by using his trade, making tents, to at least partially support him in his ministry. Paul used this highly portable trade to move himself and the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. It should be noted that Paul did not depend solely on his tentmaking efforts to support his journeys. Many churches joined in helping to fund the church planting enterprise which created tremendous prayer support for the apostle. Recent missiologists have attempted to move away from the term “tentmaking” because it is often misused to insinuate that such church planters do not need the support of the local church. Instead, church planters are more often referred to as bi-vocational missionaries. Priest notes that, “Bi-vocational missionaries can receive some of their support from those concerned with worldwide evangelism. They may have a stronger prayer, financial and accountability link with

²¹ Greg Livingstone, *Planting Churches in Muslim Cities*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 100-101.

supporters back home than those whose funds come solely from their secular employment.”²²

5.2 Platforms

Bi-vocational missions satisfy the needs of the church planter in those restricted-access countries by providing a platform. A platform serves the purpose of securing a visa in those countries which forbid traditional missionaries. By bringing one’s professional skills into a developing country, the church planter is able to build relationships that lead to evangelism providing possibly the only way into otherwise closed countries.²³

5.3 Evangelism and Proselytization

Some question whether or not modern missionaries have masked their true intentions in attempts to deceive the host countries. This need not be a matter of deception. In fact, “good Muslims, no matter what their profession, would be happy to spread their faith. So it is not difficult to explain to Muslims that no matter what job we might hold, spreading the ‘good news’ and seeing people get right with God is much more important to us.”²⁴ These good intentions do not make the job any easier in light of the fact that Sharia law commands the family of a person who converts to Christianity to put the proselyte to death. Thus, although church planters are bearers of good news, Muslims do not always perceive it as such. Regardless of the so-called barriers to conversion for these peoples, we must persist knowing that although the work may be slow, people will be drawn to Christ as they encounter Christ’s ambassadors.²⁵

²² Priest, *The Gospel Unhindered*. 147.
²³ Robertson McQuilkin, *The Great Omission*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 90.
²⁴ Livingstone, *Planting Churches*. 98.
²⁵ Edward R. Dayton and David A. Frasier, *Planning Strategies for World Evangelization*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 235.

VI. MUSLIM PERCEPTIONS

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization has documented that, “Muslims perceive Christian missionaries to be dishonest and deceitful, in that relief and development is often accompanied by evangelism.”²⁶ This perception may very well be the greatest barrier of all to the church planting movement. A few considerations will work to lessen the damage done by the few who have caused such perceptions.

6.1 Are We Fulfilling Our Platform?

The most important ethical consideration once a church planter is inside his host country is concerning the quality of work done. The church planter has two groups to satisfy: the sending agency and the host culture. Failure to do either job adequately means that someone is being deceived. Christians must recognize that although their life’s work may be evangelism that the host culture does have high expectations for results that they can see and share. Pentecost concludes that, “Dichotomizing between man’s spiritual and physical needs fails to fulfill the intent of the spiritual mandate which is to restore man to his position of being in the image of God.”²⁷ In other words, all men have worth whether Christian or not. It is often said that empty stomachs lead to hardened hearts on the mission field. Therefore, to avoid violating the understanding agreed upon when the church planter receives his visa, he must make the quality fulfillment of his platform a priority. One must be careful in balancing the two priorities, but ultimately, “those who love invariably become entangled in the real needs of the people group they seek to evangelize . . . (and) those who evangelize invariably make their verbal witness to Christ a part of their compassionate service.”²⁸

6.2 Gaining Ground Through Relationships

If relationships are the vehicle through which the church planter intends to funnel the gospel, then great pains must be taken to make sure that he establishes trusting

²⁶ “Ministry in Islamic Contexts,” *Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization*. (December 1995): 9.

²⁷ Edward C. Pentecost, *Issues in Missiology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 50.

²⁸ Dayton and Fraser, *Planning Strategies*. 203.

relationships. Relationships are built upon confidence, and if a Muslim opens up to a Christian bi-vocational worker, he is in essence proclaiming his trust. On the other hand, one church planter stated that all questions on the part of a Muslim can be reduced to three very basic questions: Who are you? What are you doing? Why are you doing it? In order to faithfully answer these questions, the church planter must consider the level of significance intended when the question was asked and then respond appropriately.²⁹ One's careful response to these questions is important because, "No amount of truth can quickly erase the indelible imprint of a lie, for the person who has been deceived may rightly ask himself, 'When will it happen again?'"³⁰ If they cannot trust the church planter when asked these basic questions, they will surely not trust him with matters of eternity! Livingstone notes that the church planter can expect accusations of dishonesty as his purpose becomes evident. For this reason, "Disciple-makers must be deeply rooted in the conviction that it is their obligation to help bring about reconciliation between the Savior and their Muslim friends."³¹

VII. CONCLUSION

We have seen that there is such a thing as civil disobedience that is not sinful. One might call this "sanctified civil disobedience" because from the perspective of God's word, the civil authority has acted tyrannically and has thus superceded its rights. We have also noted that in matters of truth, God is the only standard. Scriptural examples were set forth showing that western standards of truth are often pharisaical in nature because they expect more than God does. When involved in God's mandate called the Great Commission, church planters in Muslim countries will encounter situations where they must, like Peter and the other apostles, choose to obey God rather than man. Church planters will also be asked many questions concerning their work, but are not required to reveal any more than is absolutely necessary to maintain the trust of the relationship. The dual roles of a bi-vocational church planter are demanding, but must both be fulfilled in

²⁹ Anonymous, "Ethics and Tentmaking." An unpublished bible study guide.

³⁰ McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics.*, 426.

³¹ Livingstone, *Planting Churches.* 96.

order to meet the obligations of God and man. However, in all of this the church planter must be prepared to sacrifice like those of the first century church. Paul would not have known the term “closed country.” He would not have understood the hesitancy that exists among Christians today to carry the gospel to the Muslim world. After all, “There are no closed countries as long as you are willing not to come back out! Muslims may not take Christians seriously until they are willing to fill up the jails of Muslim countries.”³²

³² Ibid., 99.