Abortion, Argument Against: When Christians Should Disobey

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BreakPoint Commentary - November 2, 1998 Question Authority When Christians Should Disobey by Charles W. Colson A few years ago the journal "First Things" ran an article with a startling title: It was called "When the Court Should Not Be Obeyed". The author, Russell Hittinger, argued that the Supreme Court, by its rulings on abortion, has Raised questions about its own legitimacy. Remember, The first responsibility of government is to protect the lives of innocent people. Yet, with abortion, the government supports wielding lethal force against the innocent for private purposes. So, Hittinger argues, our government has abrogated its first responsibility -- and thereby given up its claim to our obedience. Is this truly a time when the Court should not be obeyed? The abortion issue brings into sharp focus the issue of civil disobedience. In biblical teaching, God has ordained certain authority structures -- the family, the church, and the state -- which we are commanded to honor and obey. But none of these structures has ultimate authority over our lives. Only God does. That means that if any earthly power oversteps its proper jurisdiction, then Christians have not only the right but also the duty to resist -- always, I might add, peacefully -- never violently, as we saw in New York recently with the horrid shooting of an abortionist doctor, should he duty to obey should never be taken lightly. Christians are justified in disobeying the civil law only when it contravenes a higher law. Civil disobedience should never stem from defiance of government, but only from submission to God. The classic New Testament exemplar, of course, is when Peter and John were ordered to stop preaching about Jesus. They replied, "Punish us if you must, but we will never stop preaching the Gospel." Augustine said, "An unjust law is no law at all." And this was the basis upon which Abraham Lincoln defied the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision perpetuating slavery. It was also the basis on which Martin Luther King Jr. advocated civil disobedience against laws discriminating on the basis of race. So how does this apply to American Christians in the face of courts that are perverting laws, making them contrary to the laws of God, and aggressively interfering with the people's right to self government? If courts continue to do this, we could encounter cases where unjust laws are imposed upon us. At the moment, I believe there are democratic processes still available to change the law, particularly with respect to abortion. And so long as this is true, we must work within the constitutional process. But if the courts should close the doors altogether, the Church might have to make a deliberate decision to separate itself from government. This is what happened in Nazi Germany. The confessing church signed the Barman Declaration in 1934, rejecting Hitler's moral authority to rule. It was a courageous act, and many Christians went to prison for it. Hittinger has raised a crucial question -- one of the most difficult questions Christians will ever have to face, and we should pray that that day will never come -- that the Court will recover its senses and go back to -- traditional role of applying the law, not making it -- and certainly not promoting a culture of death. This is my final broadcast in the "Christians and Politics" series and a good note on which to end is simply this: In the final analysis, Christians must remember that our ultimate allegiance is to the King of Kings, the One who rules over all temporal kingdoms of this world.