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## A Biblical Response to Oppressive Governments

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# A Biblical Response to Oppressive Governments

The Irish orator Edmund Burke once stated, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” Courageous men and women who take bold steps to protect the innocent and stand in the gap for those who do not have a voice serve as catalysts for change in society. In Nazi Germany, Sophie Scholl stood in that gap; she condemned the slaughter of Jews and recognized that Germany’s moral law differed immensely from God’s moral law. However, some individuals in the Christian community decry Sophie’s opposition to the German government as a violation of Biblical teaching on submission to government. These individuals are mistaken. In fact, Christian teaching affirms *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*’ suggestion that Christians have an obligation to proclaim truth against oppressive governments.

In *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, film director Marc Rothmund presents a historically accurate account of Sophie Scholl’s opposition to the German government—an opposition rooted in her fervently held Christian beliefs. As a Christian living in Nazi Germany, Sophie could not remain complacent while the government slaughtered Jews by the millions; so, she joined a nonviolent resistance movement called the White Rose and helped it create anti-Nazi leaflets that condemned the government’s oppressive conduct. Despite the illegality of her dissension and the deadly consequences associated with it, Sophie continued to work against the government of Germany in an effort to halt the spread of evil. While distributing the leaflets on the University of

Munich's campus, a janitor caught Sophie, her brother Hans, and their friend Christopher Probst—all members of the White Rose—and the police took them to separate interrogation rooms where they confessed to spreading their anti-Nazi message. For their rebellion, the Third Reich sentenced them to death by the guillotine. Although Sophie Scholl's opposition required a tremendous amount of courage, it blatantly violated the government's law.

*Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* portrays Sophie's blatant violation as justifiable in the context of her faith; however, many theologians and Christian scholars view Christians' opposition to government leaders—like Sophie's—as inherently unbiblical. They argue that the apostle Paul's Biblical charge to submit to people in authority prohibits any dissidence towards government: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad." (Rom. 13:1-3a). Although Paul clearly charges Christians to act obedient towards government in this Scriptural passage, his charge has exceptions. When governments such as Nazi Germany begin to become a terror to good rather than evil conduct, the Christian must take a different approach to civil behavior.

Numerous biblical passages describe exceptions to Paul's command in the Bible and support Sophie's opposition towards the unjust and oppressive government of Germany. A similar situation to Sophie's presented itself in first century Rome, where the government arrested and commanded the apostle Peter and several others to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. But after angels freed the apostles from jail, they continued to proclaim the

gospel of Jesus Christ in the temple, explicitly disobeying the government's order. The city leaders recaptured them and rebuked them saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name" (Acts 5:28). Instead of submitting to this immoral law, Peter and the other apostles responded by declaring "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29). The Bible affirms this type of civil disobedience again in the story of the prophet Daniel. When advisors convinced Darius, the king of Babylon, to issue a decree outlawing prayer to anyone other than him, Daniel refused to abide by the decree. In fact, "When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously." (Dan. 6:10). Both Peter and Daniel's opposition to government is not only present in the Bible, it is extolled and characterized as morally right. The Bible clearly suggest that when an immoral law conflicts with the Word of God, Christians must follow God's commands rather than the government's.

In Sophie's case, the Third Reich's law prohibited citizens from voicing opposition to the murder of Jews or disabled children. As a devout Christian, Sophie understood the passage from Scripture which commands "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Prov. 31:8-9). Although Paul's general principle of civil obedience prescribes that Christians should follow the laws within their society, Christians have a greater obligation to uphold God's law and protect the defenseless rather than comply with the immoral laws of a nation. Sophie recognized this truth and fulfilled the need for Christians to peacefully decry unjust and oppressive governments.

When faced with the consequences of her protest, Sophie accepted her punishment nonviolently, knowing that her faith deemed her rebellion as morally right. Sophie's rebellion does not constitute a violation of the Bible's charge to be submissive to government; instead, it falls in line with the definition of Biblical disobedience to government.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and anti-Nazi dissident in World War II, held that "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." When confronted with immoral government action, Christians like Sophie have an obligation to speak and to act in order to stop gross atrocities perpetrated by their governments. Courageous Christian men and women who defend the defenseless and advocate for the oppressed fundamentally advance the gospel of Jesus Christ and provide for those who need His love. Sophie's opposition to the German government perfectly aligns with Biblical principles of civil disobedience, and her actions have inspired thousands of others to speak out against oppressive governments and stand for the truth, no matter the cost.

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