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A Twofold Response: Respect or Resistance

Lydia Matzal

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In the world today, we are aware of the existence of oppressive governments. We may not necessarily experience them ourselves, but others throughout the world have and still do. Pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, lived in Nazi Germany and faced the abuse of the German government. The modern world remembers him for his response and efforts against the evils of his government. He states, “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” (qtd. in Lane). Bonhoeffer’s appeal to take action against an immoral and unethical government applies to the film, *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*. Sophie, a young woman who lived during Bonhoeffer’s time, chose not to be passive, but to resist her oppressive German government. From a biblical perspective, both Bonhoeffer and Scholl acted righteously. The Bible supports Sophie Scholl: *The Final Days*’ contention that despite persecution, concern for justice instills a courage to stand up against a dehumanizing government. According to God’s Word, citizens have a dual response to government: submission, but also resistance when necessary. The apostle, Paul, writes, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom. 13.1). Paul writes these words to the Christians in Rome. According to Pastor Stefan Matzal of Trinity Fellowship Church, Paul could be addressing submission to authority because the Roman Christians were struggling with this issue, or because the Bible teaches respect for government. Paul

writes that since God has instituted all governments, people should obey them. Respect for government is one side of the dual response people have towards their governments.

With concern for justice in mind, resistance is the second response towards an oppressive government. The Bible discusses that people must oppose the authority when it does not adhere to its role. God established the government to reward the righteous and to punish the wicked (1 Pet. 2.13,14). In the film, the German government does not follow this standard. Instead, the Nazis massacre millions of civilians, while arresting and persecuting Sophie Scholl and her colleagues for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets. Sophie advocates for the Jews and mentally disabled in her cross-examination with the Nazi interrogator, Robert Mohr. She fights against the Nazis' ideology for a master race, mindful of the value of all human life. Her argument agrees with Scripture because the Bible commands people to defend the rights of the poor (Prov. 31.8,9). Sophie's moral beliefs offer her the courage to oppose her corrupt and immoral government. Despite the general principles on respect for authorities and opposition when necessary, the proper response to an oppressive government is not often obvious. The reaction towards abusive authorities often falls in the gray area. However, people should not remain passive, because, according to Bonhoeffer, passiveness in and of itself is an action. In addition, Pastor Stefan Matzal advises that people should oppose the government when it "commands things that God forbids or forbids things God commands." A government that forces its citizens to break God's law should be resisted as much as one that prohibits its citizens from doing what God has directed through the Bible. Although the proper response to a dehumanizing government is often not directly stated in the Bible, devotion to God's law should inspire courage to oppose abusive authority. Scripture supports Sophie's resistance towards her government as seen through biblical characters who oppose their governments for violating God's principles and are commended for it. Similar to Sophie Scholl's situation, John the Baptist confronts King Herod because of Herod's immoral actions, and John loses his life for it. King Herod married his brother's wife, Herodias. John the Baptist challenges the king, telling Herod such

an act is unlawful. Herodias resents John because he says the affair is wrong according to Old Testament law, and she succeeds in having him executed (Mark 6.17, 18, 24, 27, Ex. 20.14). John the Baptist's case is slightly different from Sophie's in that he confronts a single authority on the basis of one man's personal immortality. However, both John and Sophie's concern for moral justice and righteousness embolden them to challenge their authorities. Another example from Scripture that supports Sophie's ethical opposition of the Nazi government is found in Acts 5. Religious authorities arrest Peter and several other apostles because the apostles are preaching in Jesus' name. The high priest questions Peter and the apostles, but they declare, "We must obey God rather than man!" (Acts 5.30). Likewise, Sophie finds that she must obey her moral principles rather than submit to her dehumanizing government. Her convictions and the apostles' concern for God's principles over man's offer Sophie and the apostles the courage to oppose immoral authorities. The Bible supports Sophie's resistance towards the German government because of her moral beliefs and choices.

Oppressive governments are found around the world today, and although the Bible offers a dual response to government, each particular situation involving people and their authorities is different. Absolutes do not always exist to determine when it is right to submit or to oppose the government. However, the Bible commands people to respect the established governing authorities, unless the governments are in discord with God's law. The responses of John the Baptist, as well as Peter and the other apostles support Sophie Scholl's opposition towards the Nazi government. From a biblical standpoint, she acts justly and in accordance with moral principles when she fights against the ideology of an oppressive government.

Works Cited

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