

Government (1): Legality

Scripture

Ex 5; Num 22.36-38; 1 Sam 8.4-18; Pss 2; 94.1-7, 20f; Isa 59.1-4, 8-17; Jer 38.1-6; Dan 6.10-13; Amo 5.10-15; Mic 3; Lk 4.5-8; Jn 19.1-16; Act 4.18-20; Rom 12.9-13.10; Eph 6.19f; Phi 1.12-14; Col 2.13-15; 1 Pet 4.12-19; Rev 18.

Graih

1): Percy spent most of the winter sheltering at Graih in our early days. Although he drank a lot his main problem was severe depression. He would struggle to engage with people and found it difficult to even get up. He would often sleep in doorways and hallways, and use them as toilets.

A couple who knew Percy didn't want to see him on the streets and decided to take him into their home. To support them in this difficult task they invited another Christian to live with them as well. Through many challenges, ups and downs this couple supported Percy, fought for his access to mental health services and eventually saw him recover and return to work.

Under quaint loopholes in Manx law at the time what this couple did was illegal. It was illegal to have so many unrelated adults living under one roof. Whether they knew it or not this couple was breaking the law by inviting Percy and others in.

2): Graih has benefited over the years from the freedom that occupying a legal grey area has given us. Unlike the UK the island has no legislation governing responses to homelessness or the provision of shelters. While this can be a double-edged sword (see the lack of legislation governing accommodation in the 'Justice [1]' study) it has allowed us to work unencumbered by legal constraint.

Graih's model of engagement with society has always been to focus on the good. What is the good that must be done? What needs must be met? And how do we do that? This focus has allowed us to have clarity on what we want to do and who we want to serve. It is important to note how this focus demotes a concern with legality. While remaining within the bounds of the law may be a factor it is always secondary to doing the good. We neither want to break or keep the law. We want to do what is good.

The couple who took Percy in had no concern for the law – whether in obedience or transgression – but they had concern for a vulnerable man in need and they responded with costly love.

Questions

1. Were the couple right to take Percy and others in and therefore break the law?
2. Scripture often portrays God's people as in opposition to the 'legal' or state powers of the day. How does this influence your view on the church's position today?
3. In the NT in particular there seems to be a tension between injunctions to submit to the state and examples of apostles disobeying courts. Is there a difference between submission to the state (perhaps disagreeing but not violently resisting it and accepting fines or imprisonment if necessary) and obedience to the state (perhaps doing exactly what it asks)?
4. What is your response to Graih's approach of 'focussing on the good'? How does this differ from a usual Christian response of obeying the law *until* it conflicts with God's demands?
5. In what circumstances, if any, would you be prepared to break the law? Why?
6. Scripture often portrays legal power in conjunction with wealth and often oppression and injustice. Is this the case today? How should the church respond?

Ideas for further action

1. Invite people who have participated in civil disobedience or deliberately broken the law to come and share their experience.
2. What is 'the good' that is being asked of you at the moment? Consider how you can do it. Hold one another accountable and support one another.
3. Talk to your MHK(s) or civil servants drafting laws about the process of legislation. Consider how to make 'the good' more a part of this.
4. Consider what the church might look like freed from concerns over legality. Discuss how that can influence the wider life of the church.

Prayer

Father, thank you that you transcend all forms of human government through all ages. Teach us what it means to seek first your kingdom and authority.

Jesus, thank you that you have triumphed over all powers through your death and resurrection. Give us your courage in serving those in need, whatever the cost to us.

Spirit, enliven our imaginations to see how we can embody your kingdom of peace and justice in this time and place.

Amen.