

# Church of the Brethren CALL OF CONSCIENCE



## SESSION 1 Holy Obedience

### What Do I Do When God Tells Me To Love My Enemies and the Government Says I Must Kill Them?

#### Background for leaders

*The Things They Carried* is Tim O'Brien's story about military service in Vietnam. When he received a notice from the Selective Service Administration saying he should report for induction into the military, he was stunned, completely unaware that the government would require him to serve.

I remember opening up the letter, scanning the first few lines, feeling the blood go thick behind my eyes. I remember a sound in my head. It wasn't thinking, just a silent howl. . . . I felt paralyzed. All around me the options seemed to be narrowing, as if I were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight. There was no happy way out. . . . I didn't qualify for CO status—no religious grounds, no history as a pacifist. Moreover, I could not claim to be opposed to war as a matter of general principle. There were occasions, I believed, when a nation was justified in using military force to achieve its ends, to stop a Hitler or some comparable evil, and I told myself that in such circumstances I would've willingly marched off to the battle. . . . At some point in mid-July I began thinking seriously about Canada. The border lay a few

#### Purpose of this session

- Introduce the goal of this course, to lay out a plan to individually develop a position of conscience and build a file of evidence to support it.
- Help youth think about the difference between God's authority and government's authority.
- Introduce youth to what the Bible says about authority.
- Introduce youth to Brethren who have chosen "holy obedience."



hundred miles north, an eight-hour drive. Both my conscience and my instincts were telling me to make a break for it, just take off and run like hell and never stop. . . .

O'Brien only briefly considers that he has a choice between religious principle and obedience to the government and quickly decides that he must do as the government requires. Many Christians also believe they are obligated to obey government, even when governments, or the wars they fight, are unjust.

But where does the authority that governments wield come from? In the Bible we find the image of God as the one who created the world and loves the world and is the ultimate authority over the creation, even over governments. And while, as people of faith, we say we give our highest allegiance to God, we often think first about obeying our government. After all, breaking a law has more immediate consequences than breaking a commandment!

We forget sometimes that God created the world, including its institutions and governments, to keep the world in good order. But does every government keep the world in good order? Must we obey governments when they do things that violate God's good order? For instance, the Bible says that love is the greatest force (1 Corinthians 13:13) and that Christians should reject killing and love their enemies (Matthew 5:43-45). But the federal government says all males must register with Selective Service when they turn 18 and be prepared to take up arms and defend the country against its enemies. What should Christians do? Should we honor the Bible's command to reject killing? Does the Bible allow for killing in certain circumstances? Or should we do as the government requires? How do we know when government is acting to maintain the good order and when it is not?

Most days, we don't have to think about these choices. We obey the laws of the land because they help societies run smoothly and protect people's rights. We hire police officers in our communities to maintain safety and protect life. We pay taxes to cover roads, schools, medical research, and national parks. Those are all good things. As long as government is just, it functions according to the plan of creation. But when governments behave in unjust ways, they no longer represent God's way (Romans 13:1-7).

Not all actions of government are legitimate. And even *good* governments are not *perfect*. Governments get their legitimacy by being just and honest and helping societies sustain God's good order. When they fail at keeping justice and order, they cannot command the loyalty of God's people. In the end, there is a higher order that legitimate governments must serve. At times in our lives, we have to acknowledge which power has greater authority over our lives—the federal government or God. How do we know which "master" to choose?

## Materials you will need

- Copies of "Call of Conscience" handout for session 1
- Copies of "Scavenger Hunt" handout
- Copies of "Holy Obedience" handout
- Digital cameras or camera phones, one for every two to four participants
- Notebooks or blank books for a journal, one for each participant
- Markers, stickers, magazine clippings to individualize journals

## What the Bible says about who's in charge



No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (Matthew 6:24).

The Gospel of Matthew contains the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7), which is a short guide on the Christian life. Brethren have relied on this passage to inform our view of what it means to live the Christian life, how to forgive, to reject violence, and to honor relationships. In these chapters, Matthew suggests that the kingdom of God is at hand. Even though it's not a reality yet, we should live as if it were. In this portion, Jesus instructs the disciples to give up their worries about the world and live in a new way, a way that trusts God's plan. Don't worry, Jesus says, about wealth or material possessions but concentrate on what's really important: faith and care for others. Don't store up treasures for yourself supposing that wealth will keep you safe (6:19). Don't worry about your physical health (6:22). Live a healthy lifestyle and you will reap the benefits of good health. Finally, don't drive yourself crazy trying to please two masters, but choose the most important one, the ultimate master, the master over all of life and serve that master well.

Brethren have turned to this passage when they must decide whether to obey God or obey the laws of the land that conflict with the teachings of Jesus, as when the military requires young people to register for the draft or serve in the military. It reminds them to first consider what God wants them to do and only then to fulfill responsibilities of the state to maintain justice. If people are faithful, God's requirements for justice will also be the people's requirements.

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul also puts the authority of God above the authority of the state. The implication is that we do not owe honor to the dishonorable.

While the Bible doesn't often give us specific instructions for every situation, it speaks in clear ways about discipleship. On matters of authority, Paul says, "There is no authority except from God." On matters of conflict, Jesus said, "Love your enemies." On the greatest law, Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." On what is required of you: "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God." And on the most important things in life: "Faith, hope and love abide. The greatest of these is love." When people are in situations of moral decision, the Bible gives us these measures. The Bible does not offer a rule but a gauge, a way of deciding. If a decision conforms to these teachings, it is a faithful answer, even when it doesn't conform to the law of the land.

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## **A** Set up the session

Give participants a chance to talk about why they are attending these sessions and what concerns they have about the decision of conscience they face. Be sensitive to participants who are less talkative.

After this more general sharing about the series, open this session by reading the passage from *The Things They Carried* in the background material for leaders. What should we do when God tells us to love our enemies but the government says we must be ready to protect our country by killing our enemies? Who should we listen to? God or government? Can they both be right?



## **B** Digital scavenger hunt

Demonstrate how often our religious life and our citizenship bump into each other. Send youth in twos or small groups on a photo scavenger hunt in the church building. Give each team the list of items to find in the church and photograph clearly with a member of the group. These items demonstrate a few ways in which the church interacts with the government. Come back together to look at pictures, figure scores, and discuss. How does each item demonstrate the relationship between the church and the state?

## **C** Bible study on authority

To begin thinking about authority, watch the short video posted for this session. Distribute Bibles. Help everyone identify the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 5–7) and in particular Matthew 6:24 (“No one can serve two masters.”). Ask: “What are some of the “masters” we serve in our everyday lives?” Possible answers include “God,” “smart phones,” “athletics,” “fashion,” “friends.” List these on easel paper or a whiteboard. Ask: “Why is it difficult to serve God and these other interests at the same time?”

Then turn to Romans 13:1-5. Take turns reading verses. Say: “Here Paul seems to be saying the opposite thing about authority. We can and should serve God *and* the governing authorities. Who is right, Jesus or Paul?” Let youth respond. Then focus on verse 3: “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.” Paul makes a distinction between legitimate rulers who rule on behalf of God and illegitimate rulers or rules that do not serve God.

 **What should we do when God tells us to love our enemies but the government says we must be ready to protect our country by killing our enemies? Who should we listen to? God or government? Can they both be right?** 

In other words, Jesus and Paul agree. We can serve only God. Insofar as governments serve God, we should obey their laws because these are laws ordained by God. When we obey these laws, we are actually obeying God. But when rulers are unfaithful to God, they do not have authority from God. Their authority is illegitimate and they do not deserve our allegiance.

Post on newsprint:

Fugitive slave law

Jim Crow laws

1980 draft registration law



Ask youth if they can describe any of these laws. (Look online ahead of time if any are not familiar to you.) Then ask: "Do these laws represent a proper use of authority? Why or why not? Do you think you would you have obeyed them or disobeyed them? Why or why not?"

## Things to think about and do

**1. Make a journal.** One objective of this study is to help youth articulate a faith-based position on peace and create documents that give evidence of their commitments to peace in the event they would need to demonstrate a conscientious objection to war. Provide notebooks or blank books to each person and materials (markers, stickers, magazines, etc.) to personalize the covers. Encourage youth to spend time between meetings reflecting on some of the ideas they encountered in each session and writing entries in the journal. To get started, suggest some ideas, such as:

- Use a graffiti-style print to write "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24) on a page in your journal. Elsewhere on the page, name some of the "masters" you serve, like social media, video games, or clothes.
- What are some of the good things that government can do in our society?
- Why should we obey authorities?
- When, if ever, should we disobey authorities or laws?

**2. Brethren improv.** Make copies of the handout called "Holy Obedience." These are brief stories of Brethren who disobeyed unjust laws. Ask youth to take turns picking a character from the list and reading aloud the short description attached. Then set up an improvisational theater exercise. Have each youth get into character, taking on the persona of the character chosen. Give the remaining members of the group the assignment of holding an "inquisition" to convince the character to recant his or her opposition to war. Give each character about five minutes on the hot seat. If questions

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are not forthcoming, suggest a few, such as “How can you say that you’re patriotic if you don’t support America by supporting our military?” or “How realistic is it to think you alone can stop war and violence?”

**3. What would you do?** At times biblical teachings conflict with the requirements of citizenship and we have to decide whether we will comply. Divide into pairs. Ask youth to take turns answering question 1 in one minute each. Alert them when the minute is up. Call time after two minutes and have them switch partners (if the group is big enough) for the next question. Repeat for question 3.

1. Should high school students be required to say the Pledge of Allegiance?
2. Should conscientious objectors to war be required to pay federal income taxes for war?
3. Should military recruiters be allowed in high schools?



## Closing

- 1. Ponder.** Invite the youth to take time between this session and the next to consider this question: “What things are masters over you?”
- 2. Pray.** Close with a prayer of your own. Or use the whiteboard list from the Bible study above to create this prayer: “O God, in a world of [name some or all of the items from the list], help us to learn how to serve you with our whole selves. Amen.”



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