

The cover features a low-angle shot of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, with its iconic dome and spire. The cathedral is framed by two modern glass skyscrapers, one on the left and one on the right, which reflect the sky and the building. The sky is a pale, overcast blue with soft white clouds. The overall aesthetic is a blend of historical architecture and contemporary urban design.

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A Perspective of Christianity on Civil Disobedience

A Study of Hong Kong's Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement

ANN GILLIAN CHU grew up in Hong Kong as a Canadian, and graduated from the University of Edinburgh with Master of Arts (Honours) in English Language in 2006. In a turn of events, she became a Chartered Accountant and had been working as one until her move to Vancouver, Canada in 2015. She completed the Postgraduate Diploma in Theology with the Alliance Bible Seminary in Hong Kong in 2015 and graduated from Regent College's Master of Divinity program in April 2018. She will be heading off to the University of St. Andrews in September 2018 to begin her Doctor of Philosophy program.

What started as a small scale Occupy Central movement¹ on March 27, 2013 later morphed into the large scale Umbrella Movement² that lasted from September 28, 2014 to December 15, 2014, paralyzing Hong Kong for over two months.³ The key leaders of Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement are Christians who are reflective individuals, in accordance with their vocations: a minister, a lawyer, a professor, and students. As a Hong Kong Christian, I had not had any theological reflections on sociopolitical issues prior to Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement. However, these movements sparked my thinking about how Christian ethics should inform our view of civil disobedience. These events elicited different responses from different parts of the Hong Kong Christian community, causing huge conflicts within and between churches: while progressive parachurch organizations in Hong Kong have consistently engaged with sociopolitical issues, the majority of Hong Kong Christians are congregants from conservative Evangelical and Charismatic churches who have not been educated to look at sociopolitical issues through a Christian lens.⁴

Based on my reflections on these recent movements in Hong Kong, I would like to argue that Christian churches should educate their congregants on sociopolitical issues, so that both the church and individual congregants can speak to the world prophetically, as a part of Jesus' teaching in caring for the weak. Civil disobedience should not be the main means for the church to express social concerns. Rather, a godly life that witnesses Jesus as Lord should be how

Christians exert their power to effect changes in society. This witness cannot be short-term, like civil disobedience is so often; it must be sustained and life-long.

Prior to the movements, Hong Kong churches, especially Evangelical and Charismatic ones, displayed an innate suspicion of social involvement, because social involvement is seen as straying from preaching the Gospel.⁵ For these churches, Christianity is only concerned with spiritual and individual morality, rather than larger sociopolitical structures and systems. Evangelism, in turn, becomes the only means of acceptable worldly engagement. The dichotomization of spirituality from the secular world is why most laypeople have not been taught to think about sociopolitical issues from a Christian perspective. However, the New Testament is full of spiritual *and* political teachings. The church should educate congregants to interpret their highly politicized contemporary world through a Christian lens, because all human work has value and eternal significance, even when it seems secular.⁶

Why is the influence of Christian ideals upon the formation of lay socio-political views so important?⁷ In order for the church to effectively

implement God's Word so that it acts as a check and balance to the authorities, the church needs to be able to engage the government in dialogue. Standing outside shouting critique is generally regarded as a nuisance – to work effectively within the system, the church needs individual laypeople within the government and the business world who hold strong Christian convictions on sociopolitical issues and who are willing to advocate for Christian ethics. Their social standing and official roles within the government and the business world will afford them opportunities to speak in a way that the Chinese government will respect. However, it is important to note that attempts to work within the system do not mean that we, as Christians, necessarily endorse or go against the system.⁸ Our focus as Christians should always be on the Lord, and there are many people who try to do what is theologically appropriate within the constraints of their position as a life-long witness to Christ as Lord before the world.⁹ People such as William Wilberforce¹⁰ and the Earl of Shaftesbury¹¹ demonstrate the effectiveness of social reformers. They used political means to achieve social justice by empowering the poor, promoting social criticism, and striving towards a more democratic government.¹²

Despite the difficulties and ambiguities of the realities of the public sphere, they were able to work constructively and conscientiously for the government and for social benefit while preserving their integrity.¹³ Their work in their times proves that civil disobedience is not necessary when Christian ideals can be channeled within the system, working to promote social justice in a way that can be understood by governmental authorities.

I would be hesitant to argue for civil disobedience as an ideal means for the church to speak into the world prophetically. Yet there are other arguments that propose civil disobedience as a necessity, especially in the context of Hong Kong, and it would not do them justice if I did not at least mention them. It could be argued that since policies are, in effect, decided by a Chinese government that does not listen to the people when the issues are presented in a subtler manner, now is the time for more drastic measures. Accordingly, the Occupy Central movement has claimed that they responded with civil disobedience as a last resort, when grievance procedures were exhausted. It is true that, since the handover in 1997, people in Hong Kong have held massive demonstrations, de facto referendums, and hunger strikes; yet there seems

to be little effect in achieving universal suffrage. In fact, freedom of speech seems even more limited.¹⁴ However, who can be the judge that all means have been sought? What we can see explicitly is all the efforts that have been undertaken outside the system to undermine the system, which is why the Chinese government is so strongly against it. However, if we attempt to work within the system, even though it is a slow and less visible process, the effect may be greater than we can imagine.

It can be difficult to justify civil disobedience as necessary. Yet, we Christians refer to the Bible, which teaches us that civil disobedience is only justified when the authority forces believers to disobey the law of God. For example, in the early church, the Roman Empire was a pagan empire. Therefore, the concept of a secular state did not exist. Under such rule, the followers of Jesus in the New Testament risked their lives by not following the pagan imperial power. This demonstrates that civil disobedience is viable when religious freedom is under threat, but it is an option that should not be taken lightly and requires communal consultation and consensus. However, under most other circumstances, Christians' primary responsibilities are

evangelism and godly living, through which we witness to Christ before the world, in hopes of changing others and affecting society.¹⁵

It is difficult to argue that religious freedom for Christians in Hong Kong is under threat, or that Christians are being forced to disobey the law of God: under Basic Law, the Hong Kong people still have freedom of religion, unless it openly contravenes the law of the region. In practice, this means that the Chinese government is concerned with treason, secession, sedition, and subversion against the Chinese government.¹⁶ It is unlikely for any government, even ones in the Western world that characterize themselves as democratic and civilized,

to freely accept religions that promote treason, so this clause is not a radical thought. Moreover, the goals of the Umbrella Movement and the Occupy Central movement are the revocation of moral and national education and for universal suffrage to be implemented. How do either directly relate to disobeying the law of God? Sociopolitical concerns are part of Jesus' teachings, especially on caring for those without a voice and in speaking prophetically to the fallen world. However, when Christians address such matters, it is not necessarily through measures such as civil disobedience.¹⁷

The use of civil disobedience in Hong Kong's situation is unjustified from the Christian

For Further Reading

Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community
by Oliver O'Donovan

The Just War Revisited by Oliver O'Donovan

Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present by Oliver
O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan

Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture
by Jaroslav Pelikan

The Church in Politics by Andres S. K. Tang

Theological Reflections on the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement
edited by Justin K. H. Tse and Jonathan Y. Tan

The Mission of God's People: a Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission
by Christopher J. H. Wright



perspective, as it was not brought about because of lack of freedom of religion. The protesters state that civil disobedience is justifiable if done conscientiously, without inflicting harm on others.¹⁸ The protesters might claim that they are simply fasting or participating in an illegal sit-in protest, which in their view is a non-violent means of protest. Yet who is to say self-inflicted pain is not a form of violence?¹⁹ Not only does it cause harm to the demonstrators, it also hurts those who care for them. Who is to say disrupting the livelihoods of those working and living in the “occupied areas” is not a form of violence? The movement caused financial loss, not only to multinational corporations, but especially to day laborers who worked near the protest areas. The protest made it difficult if not impossible for the day laborers to get to work, leaving them without wages. Striving for freedom alone is not enough; demonstrators need to care for the effects on people’s daily lives as well. Good motives do not excuse actions of self-injury or actions that deprive others financially. Furthermore, the negative impacts of the movement present a negative witness of Christ to society.²⁰

On a micro level, Occupy Central caused conflict in interpersonal relationships, despite the stated aims of

achieving political goals through dialogue and consensus, and building a channel for communication for those with different beliefs.²¹ Contrary to these aims, the movements drove people of different views farther away from each other, rather than promoting dialogue. Presently, nobody trusts that those with different views have the best interests of Hong Kong at heart. Congregants within the same church with different views are unable to listen to each other. More devastatingly, Christian leaders on both sides of the argument have made high profile proclamations and accusations, exposing the rift in Christ's church to the world. Certainly, this cannot be the best way for Christians to witness to Christ. When causing such conflict in all walks of life, is civil disobedience really the best way for Christians to speak into the world, as opposed to developing influential laypersons to act as the church's advocates with the government?²²

Christians live in tension between the demands of the world in which they live and the demands of Christian discipleship.²³ In a world that is already but not yet, when facing sociopolitical issues, Christians need to trust that their advocacy within the government resembles the slow

work of God, and that some extent of good achieved within the existing structure is in itself a form of good.²⁴ This form of advocacy will not only change society; it will also allow the church to act as a witness for Christ to the world in ways that civil disobedience cannot.²⁵ Moral integrity is essential to Christian distinctiveness, and in turn, witnesses to Christianity in the public sphere. In the short run, it might seem more effective for Christians to participate in a one-off large-scale demonstration than to witness to the world by being good citizens and workers, yet only lasting for two months and without any follow up action, the lack of perseverance in the Umbrella Movement will be questioned by the watchful eyes of the secular world.²⁶ This is why Christian churches can and should achieve social justice through a life-long witness to Jesus as Lord, educating their congregants about social concerns in order to raise up advocates for the church in the existing structure, rather than engaging in disruptive short-term acts such as civil disobedience.²⁷ Who will be the Moses of Israelites and courtier of Pharaoh for Hong Kong?²⁸ It will truly be a liberating sight when the congregants of Hong Kong churches can proclaim peacefully and collectively: "Here am I; send me!"²⁹

Endnotes

- 1 Occupy Central Movement is short for Occupy Central with Love and Peace, a campaign for universal suffrage in Hong Kong through the civil disobedience act of occupying Central, the central business district of Hong Kong. The movement came about because the campaigners believe that a truly harmonious society can only be built upon a just political system. From Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement, "Manifesto," accessed February 26, 2017, available from http://oclp.hk/index.php?route=occupy/book_detail&book_id=11#sthash.65R380YM.dpuf.
- 2 Umbrella Movement, also known as the Umbrella Revolution, was independently organized illegal demonstrations in several major districts in Hong Kong. The aim of this civil disobedience act is to strive for universal suffrage in Hong Kong. The name contains "umbrella" because the protestors, mainly students, used umbrellas to defend themselves when the Hong Kong police used pepper spray and tear gas to disperse the crowd. From Daniel R. Russel, "Evaluating the Impact of the 'Umbrella Movement,'" accessed June 20, 2017, available from <https://www.humanrights.gov/dyn/2014/12/evaluating-the-impact-of-the-umbrella-movement/>.
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- 7 Lausanne Committee, "Lausanne Occasional Paper 21."
- 8 Andres S. K. Tang, *The Church in Politics*, (Hong Kong, SAR: Logos Publishers, 2015), 11-17.
- 9 Alliance Bible Seminary and others, "Communal Reconciliation under the Umbrella Movement," accessed February 13, 2017, available from <https://youtu.be/RuYW1w6euDM>.
- 10 William Wilberforce was a member of the British parliament in the nineteenth century and a personal friend of William Pitt, the prime minister of the United Kingdom at the time. Due to his Christian convictions, he worked tirelessly within the governmental system to abolish slave trade in Britain and British colonies. From Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: the Reformation to the Present Day*, (New York, NY:

- HarperCollins, 2010), 360.
- 11 Earl of Shaftesbury Anthony Ashley Cooper was a member of the British parliament in the nineteenth century. Due to his Christian convictions, he worked tirelessly within the governmental system to enact laws that provided better environment and more rights for those who were marginalized and oppressed. From Donald M. Lewis, "Moses of these Israelites, Courtier of Pharaoh: Wilberforce and Shaftesbury as Evangelical Lay Leaders: Parts 2," *Crux* 36:No. 4 (Dec 2000): 20-30.
 - 12 *ibid.*
 - 13 Wright, 222-243.
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 - 15 Jeffrey P. Greenman, "Lord of the Powers: What is the Proper Relationship between Church & State? Church and State in Early Christianity" (lecture, Regent College, Vancouver B.C., Fall 2015).
 - 16 Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, "The Basic Law," accessed February 26, 2017, available from <http://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/>.
 - 17 Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement, "Manifesto."
 - 18 Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement, "Manual of Disobedience," accessed February 26, 2017, available from http://oclp.hk/index.php?route=occupy/eng_detail&eng_id=28.
 - 19 Tang, *The Church in Politics*, 81-91.
 - 20 Johannes Chan, "Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement," *The Round Table* 103, No. 6: 571-580.
 - 21 Alliance Bible Seminary and others, "Communal Reconciliation under the Umbrella Movement."
 - 22 Tang, *The Church in Politics*, v-xxiii, 162-164.
 - 23 Duane Heffelbower, "The Christian and Civil Disobedience," *Direction* 15: No. 1 (Spring 1986): 23-30.
 - 24 John W. Chan, "Thy Kingdom Come: a Comparison of Eschatological-Political Ethics between Stanley Hauerwas and Karl Barth as a Theological Construction of Widerstandstheologie in Hong Kong," *Jian Dao* 46 (Jul 2016): 135-154.
 - 25 Chan, "Thy Kingdom Come," 135-154.
 - 26 Wright, 222-243.
 - 27 Tang, *The Church in Politics*, 67-80.
 - 28 Donald M. Lewis, "Moses of these Israelites, Courtier of Pharaoh: Wilberforce and Shaftesbury as Evangelical Lay Leaders: Parts 1," *Crux* 36: No. 3 (Sep 2000): 22-31.
 - 29 Isaiah 6:8

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