

Eternal Sovereign of the Sky*Isaac Watts (1674–1748)*

Eternal Sovereign of the sky,
 And Lord of all below;
 We mortals to thy majesty
 Our first obedience owe.

Our souls adore thy throne supreme,
 And bless thy providence,
 For magistrates of meaner name,
 Our glory and defence.

Kingdoms on firm foundations stand,
 While virtue finds reward;
 And sinners perish from the land
 By justice and the sword.

Let Caesar's due be ever paid
 To Caesar and his throne;
 But consciences and souls were made
 To be the Lord's alone.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Let Me Say It Again***Kevin T. Bauder*

During the 1990s I was planting and pastoring Faith Independent Baptist Church in Sachse, Texas, while working on a degree at Dallas Theological Seminary. During those years I encountered two protest movements that stood at opposite ends of the political spectrum. One was Operation Rescue, whose leader pastored a church about two miles from our meeting house. The other was a racial equality movement led by Dallas County Commissioner John Wylie Price.

Operation Rescue was founded by Randall Terry, but by the mid-1990s it was headed by evangelical minister Flip Benham. It was the first pro-life organization to adopt the tactics of the 1960s counter-culture, complete with sit-ins that obstructed access to abortion clinics. The organization sponsored hundreds of blockades, drawing thousands of protesters, who experienced over ten thousand arrests per year during the late 1980s, leading to hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines.

John Wylie Price's protests operated on a much smaller scale, but they regularly captured the attention of the Dallas media. During the early 1990s Price was exploiting a loophole in Dallas's pedestrian ordinances that allowed him to block traffic on busy streets. Price and his followers would wait at an intersection for a signal light so that they could begin crossing the street legally. Careful to remain in the crosswalk, they would take tiny steps, walking at a rate that would consume a full cycle of the light before they reached the far side of the street. Then the light would change, and they would start back in the other direction. What they were doing was perfectly legal, but by pacing themselves they could blockade traffic for hours.

During those years I regularly received invitations from Operation Rescue or similar groups to participate in protests, or at least to promote the protests from the pulpit. I fully supported the goal of reversing abortion on demand and overturning Roe v Wade, which is one of the worst decisions in the history of the United States Supreme Court. Yet, as I worked through the issues, I found that I could not support the tactics that Operation Rescue was employing.



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Partly my objections were grounded in the tone of these anti-abortion groups. The difference between us can be summarized by a conversation I had with one of their leaders. “Why don’t you scream against this evil?” he screamed at me. My response was that “Very few real evils can be addressed by screaming.” I still believe that’s true.

Screaming is manipulation. Screaming is intimidation. Screaming is coercion. Screaming preempts all attempts at persuasion. Screaming is a tactic of the Left, which believes (in true Marxian fashion) that differences in viewpoint are fundamentally about power, that false consciousness masks exercises of power, and that consciousness must be raised through the assertion of countervailing force. Because I reject the assumptions, I also reject the tactic. Conservatives should see screaming and its kindred tactics (brute confrontation, intimidation, name calling, and demonization) as contradictory to what they hope to accomplish. Any leader who screams, blusters, bullies people, or engages in name-calling to gain an audience is subverting conservatism, whatever other values he may hold.

My problem with the tone of Operation Rescue was, however, the lesser of my objections. My greater objection was that, by deliberately flouting just laws, the organization committed itself to an immoral and ultimately anarchic tactic. People of principle must judge not only ends but also means. The means that Operation Rescue chose were means that a person of conscience must reject.

The rule of law is critical to any ordered society. The general precept that Scripture requires of Christians is that they respect laws and obey governmental officials (Rom 13:1–7). Christians have formulated three possible exceptions to this rule: when the state’s law is contrary to God’s law, when the state’s law is contrary to its own higher laws, and when the state’s law exceeds the purview of legitimate governmental concern. Over the centuries Christians have carried on a rich conversation about the questions of when, where, and how civil disobedience is either permitted or required.

The majority view—and the view to which I subscribe—is that, given a legitimately constituted government, all just laws must be obeyed. Challenging and even disobeying unjust laws is sometimes permissible, and sometimes even obligatory, but these are exceptions to the rule. What we must never do is to break a just law to challenge an unjust one.

Mutatis mutandis, property laws are just laws. Traffic laws are just laws. Such laws must not be broken, even when objecting to an unjust law. We have every right to seek redress in the face of unjust laws. We may challenge those laws in court; we may seek to change them through the electoral process; we may even protest them on the street. If we choose to protest them, however, we must be careful to obey all just laws in the process.

Operation Rescue rejected the rule of law. Those who cooperated with that organization in breaking just laws deserved the arrests, jail time, and fines that they received. The irony is that John Wiley Price—clearly a politician of the Left—found a way of protesting that made his point but that kept the law intact. In this particular instance, his means must be judged more moral than the means adopted by those who professed conservative and even Christian ideals.

The principle I am articulating is simple, and it is as relevant today as it ever was. We must judge means as well as ends. A lofty goal does not justify immoral means. When protesting an evil, we must not violate just laws. Perhaps somebody could reduce this principle to a slogan and put it on a picket sign.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
