

What About Bible “Smuggling”?

By Tom White

In some countries around the world today, it is against the law either to print or sell or import or distribute the Holy Bible or other Christian literature. How should Christians react to this? The words “against the law” disturb us. Some Christians claim the Bible “smuggling” is wrong because it dishonors scriptures concerning obedience to the government. How far and into what areas does that obedience extend? The following contrasts are presented to illustrate the gap between historical reality and uninformed judgements.

WHAT ABOUT BIBLE “SMUGGLING”?

When the mother of Moses was lovingly hiding her baby in the basket (Exodus 2), one of her church officials knocked on her door and convinced her that her act was “illegal.” Realizing her sin, she surrendered Moses to the authorities. He was killed and the Jews remained in slavery.

When Joseph and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were sneaking Him out of Bethlehem at night (Matthew 2), their friends, representing various religious institutions, reminded them that King Herod would be displeased by their illegal act. They surrendered Jesus. He was murdered with the rest of the children. The angel who had warned and instructed them was informed upon by some irate seminary professors and was tried in absentia and given a five-year prison sentence.

During two Godly authorized jailbreaks (Acts 5 and 12), the Apostle Peter told surprised angels that he must respect the authorities and return to jail. The Christians praying with Rhoda never learned of his miraculous release.

When the jailer took the Apostle Paul into his home after the earthquake (Acts 16), Paul told him that God had made a mistake and they must return to the jailhouse.

When Paul was being lowered in the basket over the wall (Acts 9), one of the men above had second thoughts and grabbing the rope said, “Wait a minute fellas, are you sure this is legal? Didn’t Paul want us to give the authorities our spiritual rights, too?” Paul didn’t get a chance to answer. When the basket jerked to a stop, he had fallen out and broken his neck.

The first few centuries of Christians were very embarrassed that they were called atheists for not worshipping Caesar. They listened to some theological experts who unrestrictedly embraced a few Bible passages about government authority. They turned in their lists of members, gave up their secret (scroll copying) print shops, revealed the addresses of their catacomb meetings and stopped smuggling Bible texts out of respect to the emperor who claimed to be God. In a few months Christianity ceased to exist.

The above illustrations may sound ridiculous or even blasphemous. They are not meant to be. They are based on prevalent attitudes among some Christian circles today about secret Christian work.

ISN'T THAT ILLEGAL?

I recently gave some high school students a tour of our building describing our work and our five main goals. One of them kindly asked, "Isn't that Illegal?"

A representative of one of the largest Bible printing agencies tells an inquirer at a church service that smuggling Bibles to China is "illegal". China is a nation that everyone admits will never have enough Bibles, where there is an estimated 20,000 conversions to Christ per **day**, a nation where pastors are still beaten and some vomit blood. (Ask us for the China Report.) Giving the Word of God is illegal? We seem to have forgotten that God is legal. Satan is illegal.

A seminary professor in India told all of his students that Christians in prison in Cuba deserve to stay in jail (for distributing Christian literature) because they "broke Cuban law."

Many Christians know little about the survival techniques of two thousand years of Christianity under conflict. Some patently reject persecuted Christians as not the "right kind" from their own denomination. Others have the luxury of relatively comfortable, non-confrontational positions and over generations have fallen victim to religiously compartmentalizing their thinking and living in a theologically "perfect world", refraining from facing the fact that each Christian is called to be a "partaker of Christ's sufferings" (I Peter 4:12).

THE LAW OF LOVE

In an imperfect world there are soul wrenching questions. We might agree to the fact that William Tyndale had to hide pages of the Bible in bales of cotton to smuggle into England. He was burned at the stake. That is history. Hindsight is comfortable. There is no risk or embarrassment. But what about hiding a bible today? This is when the law of Christ's perfect love takes effect.

What would we say to a Vietnamese school teacher who hid her Bible under her skirt when police began confiscating Bibles at a meeting in her home? She had brought many non-believers to Christ using the Word of God. Should she submit? Give the authorities her Bible? The police "represent" the law. We are not discussing Greek and Hebrew and "interpretations" in an air-conditioned Bible class. We are discussing real life situations, today. This school teacher is a friend of mine. I have met many such Christians during several visits to Vietnam.

We would probably agree to Christian short-wave radio broadcasts which "smuggle in" the Word of God in spite of the hostile North Korean jamming stations. That is an "easy" decision. No permission is needed. No life is threatened. Smuggling in the printed Word is not so easy. Korean Christians hid rolled-up hymn sheets inside the walls of their houses. How easy is it for them? Smuggle is a negatively loaded work which makes us think of drugs or weapons. Think again.

It is not "legal" to distribute Scriptures or witness about Christ in certain Muslim nations. Jesus said, "Go into all the world." What will we do with that? Can we visit a few "international church buildings" for foreigners or worship only on protected oil company

compounds while millions die in the streets without Christ? What does ALL the world mean? Currently there is one missionary per one million Muslims.

Paul finally went the legal route to execution and God received glory in Rome. Thomas was speared to death in India. He evangelized “without permission” understanding his spiritual authority when he stepped off the ship. Almost all of the disciples died violent deaths with approval of the authorities. Might we risk a statement saying that their acts were considered “illegal”?

What would we say to Christians (in nations where Bibles are totally forbidden for nationals) who secretly use government controlled presses to print Christian literature? In such situations (not “situation ethics”) there is only one law, the laws of love which begins and ends with God and His sacrifice on the cross. Those who do not receive this message are condemned to Hell. Would we tell the Christians to stop printing?

OFFICIAL – UNOFFICIAL

When “official” churches or one printing press exists, many outsiders are deceived. China has a huge Bible press. Yet no other Christian presses are allowed in a nation of one billion two hundred million people. Christians discovered with their own press in Northern China in the early 1990’s were tortured and killed. Their homes were dynamited. If the American government only allowed one Christian press in the USA, would we then raise our spiritual noses in the air and call all other printing “illegal”?

North Korea has two church buildings, Catholic and Protestant in the capitol. No other churches exist in the other cities with an estimated underground Christian population of 60,000. If only one Baptist church was allowed in Dallas, Texas (as was in Moscow for decades) would we call all the other Baptist churches “illegal”?

We hear about “registered” churches and “unregistered” churches in countries where Christians are restricted. We are told that even in America all churches must be registered with the government. That is not true. The IRS has a fourteen point criteria for registration to qualify as a “tax exempt” organization-church. Even without exemption, anyone, anytime can have a church. There is no compulsory church registration in America the way there is in China, Vietnam, Cuba, etc. There is no need to feel guilt when describing the “unregistered church” in some countries. We do not realize that churches in America go through most legal establishment procedures on a **voluntary** basis.

Many large denominational operations in the West could receive a greater measure of fellowship and love and a more completed view of Christ if they risk forming contact with the persecuted church, even in areas where they have no official representation. Fidel Castro, the Communist leader of Cuba, had 100,000 Bibles taken to a sugar mill where they were ground up. The leather covers were kept for making purses. A Cuban denominational leader joyfully revealed that at least fifty percent of all Bibles brought into Cuba these last decades were smuggled by many who dared to intervene. It takes both official and “unofficial”. We thank God for both.

TOILET PAPER BIBLES

In the 1970's, even though we produced photos showing how "officially presented" Bibles has later been made into toilet paper by the Communists in Eastern Europe, some organizations refused to sell Bibles to us for smuggling. Therefore, our presses in Europe printed 200,000 Bibles for smuggling to four Eastern Europe countries.

Some groups still publish that Bible smuggling is "wrong". A few engage in insufficient legal printing inside restrictive nations. We encourage anyone to give also to their worthy efforts, but feel that some of their publicity tells only the "official" story. They cooperate with religious and political officials who beat, kill and imprison Christians now, today. Our news speaks for that other part who have no voice and no Bible. We are thankful that the Lord uses different parts of His body to complete His Work.

BREAKING THE "LAW"

Can a Christian use deception when confronted with evil? Certainly such situations are plentiful in Scripture. Rehab hiding the spies, etc. Do we write "tourist" on our visa application when our purpose is to deliver the World of God or do we write "Bible Smuggler"? Do you tell rapist where your daughter is hiding? We do not need to feel guilty about such deception, just as King David did not feel guilty for acting crazy and slobbering in his beard so that his enemies would release him.

In Cuba, I was sentenced to a twenty-four year prison sentence under a literature law which had a maximum fifteen-year penalty. They abused their own law. Do we have such christian/political literature laws in our country? Those who feel that secret Christian work in restricted nations is "illegal" do not realize that those nations laws themselves would be illegal in our own nation.

Many restricted nations have wonderful religious freedom laws on their books for their publicity value. The former Soviet Union had such laws while imprisoning or murdering Christian leaders. On the other end, police in Vietnam confiscate Bibles in homes, when no such anti-Bible law exists.

We come from 1,000 year of respecting English law. To make statements that smuggling bibles is breaking "the law" of another nation simply reflects our ignorance of their situation.

GOD'S ATTITUDE/ANGELIC ENCOURAGEMENT

It is good to review and realize the purpose of all of the "illegal" acts in Scripture which God Himself ordained. The purpose is not to protest having a driver's license, or paying taxes. It is not to focus all our energy on a government as the great enemy. In the light of centuries of humanity and millions dying without Christ, such a focus can easily become a waste of Christian energy.

Paul in Romans 13:5 wrote that the principle in submission to government was to have a good conscience citing civil obedience. Would you have a good conscience if you were against setting God's Word to those who have not heard in closed countries? We are accountable to God and the government, but to God first. Early Christians respected

Caesar's authority in civil matters but did not submit in matters of worship/spiritual freedom.

For those of us who truly understand this foundation, the statement that Bible smuggling is "illegal" has the same effect as water running down a ducks back. We are usually too busy to worry about it. The idea that it could be illegal to give the word of God to anyone, anytime, anywhere, any way who needs and want it, is sad and a trick of the author of illegality – the Devil.

Acts 5:19-20, 29 clearly demonstrates Gods attitude, Gods actions and our response. The angel disobeyed the authorities telling the apostles to continue to speak "the words of life." The apostles, greatly encouraged, said to the council, "We ought to obey God rather than men." Angels throughout the New Testament encouraged men and women to circumvent restrictive situations for the sole purpose of spreading the gospel the same way the Holy Spirit enlightens us today.

Some theologians will argue these Scriptures were special cases for special times. That argument hides the main point. Gods attitude is revealed. What do these few of many such Bible "legal-spiritual confrontation" section reveal about gods attitude and adaptation towards authorities when they inhibit the spread of the Gospel perverting the program of Christ's Great Commission in Matthew 28? God, who is legal, "bypasses" the devil who is illegal and continues with His program.

Perhaps those who declare secret work in restricted countries illegal do not realize or know about the immediate imprisonment or death today, stretching from North Korea/China across Saudi Arabia over to Algeria for Christians. David Barrett report in *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. January 1994, that there are now about 156,000 martyrs for Christ each year, more than any time in past centuries. We must remember those in bonds as bound with them (Hebrews 13:3). We must "weep with those who weep." But those who "sow in tears will reap with joy."

May God enlarge our vision to reach our neighbors around the world. We encourage all Christian institutions, all believers to follow Christ's greatest commandments – Love your neighbors as yourself. Your neighbors are waiting.

Extra copies of this pamphlet are freely available
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