

3F

Peaceful Protest & Civil Disobedience

All people have a duty to obey the law (see [D&C 134:6](#) and [Article of Faith 12](#)). This duty does not, however, preclude the possibility of peaceful protest against and civil disobedience to unjust laws (see [Exodus 1:15-17](#)).

GOALS

1. To enhance our commitment to the rule of law, due process, and justice for all.
2. To understand how peaceful protest, including civil disobedience, can be used as a mechanism to increase morality, ethics, and democratic legitimacy in government.

Members of [Mormon Women for Ethical Government \(MWEG\)](#), in alignment with teachings of [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#), believe in “[obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law](#).” The [rule of law](#) requires all people — elected officials included — to abide by the laws of the land. As [D&C 134](#) makes clear, those laws are established to protect our “inherent and inalienable rights” (v. 5) and should operate “for the good and safety of society” (v. 1). Particularly since the massive global missionary outreach beginning in the middle of the last century, the Church has [emphasized](#) obedience to laws “to protect Latter-day Saint communities by convincing sometimes hostile governments that Church members do not pose a political threat.”

We understand, however, that human laws are at times unjust and can be used to actively perpetuate injustice or deny some of God’s children the ability to enjoy their inherent rights ([D&C 98:5](#)). For Latter-day Saints, the response to such laws will always need to be calibrated according to the political systems of the countries in which they live. However, in the United States, citizens have an ethical and moral obligation to exercise the rights of free speech and freedom of assembly granted to them under the Constitution in order to work for reform. This is particularly the case when unjust laws undermine democracy, result in disenfranchising people (see [PEG 2a](#)), place unfair burdens upon certain segments of the population (see [PEG 2](#)), or ignore due process (see [PEG 2c](#)).

SCRIPTURE STUDY

“We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society.”
— [D&C 134:1](#)

We “should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of [our] own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness.” — [D&C 58:27](#)

[President Dallin H. Oaks](#) said of [Article of Faith 12](#) and the rule of law that “[t]his does not mean that we agree with all that is done with the force of law. It means that we obey the current law and *use peaceful means to change it*. It also means that we peacefully accept the results of elections. We will not participate in the violence threatened by those disappointed with the outcome. In a democratic society we always have the opportunity and the duty to *persist peacefully* until the next election” (emphasis added).

This peaceful persistence and protest has been utilized throughout the course of America’s history as political agents have acted to effect change and to highlight the injustices in the system. Peaceful protest has been used in many social movements to allow citizens to voice their opinions in a way that draws attention to their position and can stoke the conscience of others to join their cause. Many significant advances in the American legal system have been predicated on peaceful protests first raising awareness and support for an issue, including the women’s suffrage movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the disability rights movement. Civil disobedience is one form of peaceful protest and refers to actions undertaken in a peaceful manner that defy the existing law in pursuit of a more just solution. In many cases, civil disobedience is used to peacefully highlight the contradictions and injustices in place under a current law. (See the next page for further exploration of civil disobedience.)

PEACEFUL REFORM, PEACEFUL PROTEST

[Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and redeem the soul of America.](#)

— John Lewis

“We believe in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” ([Article of Faith 12](#)). Each of us — regardless of how much political, economic, or religious power we may have — has obligations to honor the laws of the land. Ideally, all are subject to these obligations, making the law democratic and [justice enhancing](#). Without such obligations, we are left with chaos, tyranny, and corruption.

At the same time, throughout our history, our democratic society has created and tolerated unjust laws that relegate groups of our fellow human beings to second-class citizens. We must be willing to engage in peaceful efforts to work for the reformation of unjust [laws, processes, and attitudes](#), and to model the community of belonging we wish to see — using mechanisms that clearly acknowledge and respect the rule of law. Both [President Oaks](#) and [President Ezra Taft Benson](#) have emphasized proactively upholding constitutional principles and opposing laws or practices that do not live up to the divinely inspired constitutional ideals or the “immutable unwritten laws of Heaven,” to [quote](#) “Antigone.” Moreover, the [right to dissent](#) is a vital part of [our American heritage](#) and an aspect of the freedoms of expression protected in the First Amendment.

The [Church Handbook](#) suggests many methods for engaging politically. These can include voting, joining or serving in political parties, providing financial support to involved organizations, communicating with party officials and candidates, and serving in elected or appointed offices in local and national government. The Church Handbook list also includes “participating in peaceful, legal protests” ([Section 38.8.30](#)). As President Oaks has [stated](#), the activity we choose “does require that we exercise our influence civilly and peacefully within the framework of our constitutions and applicable laws.”

This work may not be easy. As the formerly enslaved abolitionist Frederick Douglass [explained](#) in 1857:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle.

Members of the Church in general and women in particular may not be used to peaceful protest. Some observers may balk at women exercising influence (even when civil and peaceful). It is crucial to recognize the importance, as Douglass wrote, of agitation, thunder, lightning, and ocean tempests in the struggle for justice and equity. Women have a unique role to play as peacemakers; when protests, civil disobedience, and other forms of nonviolent action include women, these actions are more likely to [remain nonviolent and be successful](#).

What do you think?

- *Have you used peaceful protest to engage in efforts to reform unjust laws? What did you accomplish? What were the consequences? Were such activities effective at bringing about change? Why or why not?*
- *Read this list of [“198 Methods of Nonviolent Action.”](#) Which of these methods of peaceful protest are you comfortable with? Uncomfortable with? Why?*
- *What social issue is so important to you that you would be willing to participate in a protest? Why is it an important issue? What factors would contribute to your decision to protest, and what factors might prevent you from participating? Who might you take with you?*

WHAT ABOUT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE?

“Discourses Concerning Government,” by British politician and theorist Algernon Sidney, has been called “the textbook of the American revolution.” In it Algernon [argued](#): “That which is not just, is not Law; and that which is not Law, ought not to be obeyed.”

American thinkers expanded on this concept. When the U.S. went to war with Mexico in 1846, Henry David Thoreau and other critics of the war disapproved of this way for slavery to expand into the Southwest. The term “**civil disobedience**” arose from the [essay](#) Thoreau wrote explaining his refusal to pay taxes, which would support war and slavery. In it he asked: “Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.”

Martin Luther King Jr., in his [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#), likewise argued for the morality of civil disobedience. He wrote:

One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. . . . One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Thus [disobedience is civil](#) when it:

- “involves deliberate law breaking, but not necessarily lawlessness or criminality. Rather, civil disobedience refers to some morally serious decision to disregard the law” ([Oman, 4](#)). Those engaging in civil disobedience **willingly suffer the legal penalties of an unjust law** in order to highlight the injustice. In this way “they also, ironically, uphold the rule of law” ([Pulsipher, 138](#)).
- “seeks to establish a more just society” and encourages “future cooperation with those who currently uphold the unjust laws.” It is therefore **necessarily nonviolent** ([Pulsipher, 136](#)). Civil disobedience must not be done with an intent to hurt or harm.
- is **communicative** in nature “to create a climate in which an unjust law might be reconsidered” ([Pulsipher, 136](#)) by those in power or society at large.

What do you think?

- *Is there ever a valid reason to not obey a law? How does this balance with the importance of upholding the rule of law?*
- *How is civil disobedience compatible with democratic government? How is it incompatible?*
- *We have stated that civil disobedience should be nonviolent. What happens when the state responds with violence?*
- *How do we ensure oppressed and marginalized people are heard so that they don't feel violence is necessary to advance their cause?*
- *What happens when people are misled by disinformation and lies to think they are protecting the greater good through violent actions?*

EXAMPLES OF PEACEFUL PROTEST, DISSENT, & CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

History, literature, and scripture are replete with examples of those who have fought against injustice and for others' rights:

- The Hebrew midwives **Shiphrah** and **Puah** “feared God” and refused to follow Pharaoh’s command to kill all male babies ([Exodus 1:15-21](#)).
- After their father died having no sons, the **Daughters of Zelophehad** [appealed to Moses](#) and other male authority figures to gain an inheritance in the promised land. In response to Moses’ inquiry, God unequivocally supported the sisters’ demand and even announced “a new and permanent law to secure inheritance for any daughters in such circumstances” ([Numbers 27:1-11](#)).
- To protect her people, **Esther** was willing to stand up to the ruler of the largest empire the world had ever seen ([Esther 5, 7](#)).
- **Daniel** and his compatriots **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego** chose to disobey laws that prohibited their worship of the Lord. Each was miraculously preserved because of their faithfulness to a higher law ([Daniel 3, 6](#)).
- **Abinadi** spoke up even when the king claimed his words “raise contentions among [the] people” ([Mosiah 11:28](#)). Abinadi continued to declare the truth in open defiance of the king and accepted the consequences of his actions ([Mosiah 12-17](#)).
- **Brigadier General Alexander W. Doniphan** served in the Missouri militia during the “Mormon War” in 1838 and received this command soon after the [extermination order](#) was published: “You will take Joseph Smith and the other prisoners into the public square of Far West, and shoot them at 9 o’clock tomorrow morning.” In response, Doniphan refused: “It is cold-blooded murder. I will not obey your order. . . . [I]f you execute these men, I will hold you responsible before an earthly tribunal, so help me God.” Joseph Smith and other church leaders’ lives were spared that day.

WOMEN & PEACEFUL PROTEST

[Throughout history](#), women have often been at the forefront of peaceful protest — including civil disobedience — frequently for those whose voices are unheard or disregarded. Here are some examples of women who have been leaders in these efforts; more can be found [here](#).

HARRIET TUBMAN

[Harriet Tubman](#), the “Moses of her people,” escaped slavery and served as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. Tubman was also a scout, spy, guerrilla soldier, and nurse for the Union Army during the Civil War and an advocate for women’s suffrage.

- **Quote:** *“‘Twant me, ‘twas the Lord. I always told him, ‘I trust to you. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me,’ and he always did.”*
- **Cost:** Securing her own freedom was not enough; Tubman risked that freedom every time she returned to Maryland to free additional people.
- **Results:** Tubman rescued about 70 family and friends during approximately 13 trips.

LOVERN ROBERTSON & MINNIE QUAY

[Lovern Robertson and Minnie Quay](#) were Utah suffragists and members of the [National Woman’s Party](#). Joining almost 2,000 other women, they took turns — six days a week for nearly two and a half years — as “[silent sentinels](#)” standing outside the White House.

- **Quote:** *“I am ready to do anything within my power, and no sacrifice is too great.”* — Minnie Quay
- **Cost:** Quay and Robertson were among 33 suffragists arrested on November 10, 1917. They were taken to the Occoquan Workhouse, where the superintendent guaranteed his men would “[handle them rough](#).” Clubbed, beaten, and tortured, the suffragists dubbed their treatment the “night of terror.”
- **Results:** The women’s mistreatment amplified sympathy for suffrage. President Wilson dramatically reversed his stand on the issue, and on August 18, 1920, the 19th amendment was ratified.

CORRIE TEN BOOM

After the Netherlands fell to the Nazis during World War II, [Corrie ten Boom](#) and her family opened their home to Jewish refugees and members of the Dutch resistance. The ten Booms were devout Calvinists in the Dutch Reformed Church, and [faith](#) inspired them to provide shelter, food, and money to those in need. As their work with the resistance increased, [a secret room](#) was built in Corrie’s bedroom behind a false wall that would hold six people.

- **Quote:** *“The measure of a life, after all, is not its duration, but its donation.”*
- **Cost:** The family’s activities were eventually discovered, and they were among more than 30 people arrested in a raid on their home. (Those hiding in the secret room, however, were not found and were able to escape.) Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where Betsie died. Their father, Casper, died 10 days after the arrest at age 84. Corrie was released due to a clerical error; a week later, all the women in her age group were sent to the gas chambers.
- **Results:** It is estimated that around 800 Jews were saved by the ten Boom family’s efforts. Corrie, Betsie, and their father were named as “[Righteous Among the Nations](#).”

CLAUDETTE COLVIN

[Claudette Colvin](#) was 15 years old when she refused to give up her bus seat for a young white woman — months before Rosa Parks' heroic act.

- **Quote:** *"Whenever people ask me: 'Why didn't you get up when the bus driver asked you?' I say it felt as though Harriet Tubman's hands were pushing me down on one shoulder and Sojourner Truth's hands were pushing me down on the other shoulder. I felt inspired by these women because my teacher taught us about them in so much detail."*
- **Cost:** Claudette was handcuffed and taken to the police station. She also suffered from coarse treatment by the police.
- **Results:** Colvin was a plaintiff in *Browder v. Gayle*, which overturned bus segregation laws in Alabama.

JOAN TRUMPAUER MULHOLLAND

[Joan Trumpauer Mulholland](#) was a Freedom Rider and a participant in the Jackson Woolworth's sit-in, the March on Washington, the Meredith March Against Fear, and the Selma to Montgomery march. Her ancestors included former enslavers and sharecroppers, her family was from Georgia, and she grew up in Virginia. Many southerners saw her as the ultimate traitor for her commitment to civil rights.

- **Quote:** *"I saw something was wrong and decided to do something about it."*
- **Cost:** For her participation in the Freedom Rides, Mulholland was arrested and confined for two months in the maximum security unit of the Mississippi State Penitentiary. She was also [disowned by her family](#).
- **Results:** Mulholland supported several important moments in the Civil Rights Movement.

CORETTA SCOTT KING

In addition to working alongside her husband, Martin Luther King Jr., [Coretta Scott King](#) was, throughout her life, a peace and social justice activist in her own right. For more than 40 years, Scott King traveled the world speaking on behalf of racial and economic justice, women's and children's rights, LGBTQ dignity, religious freedom, the needs of the poor and homeless, full employment, and nuclear disarmament. Among a lifetime of incidents, the Montgomery bus boycott was, in Scott King's [own words](#), "a very trying time, when everyone seemed frightened."

- **Quote:** *"During the bus boycott I was tested by fire and I came to understand that I was not a breakable crystal figurine. I found I became stronger in a crisis."*
- **Cost:** Seven weeks into the boycott, the Kings' home was bombed. Coretta and 10-week-old daughter Yolanda were there when the bomb went off but escaped uninjured. Terrified by this violence, family members begged Coretta and baby Yolanda to leave. She refused.
- **Results:** "I realized how important it was for me to stand with Martin. And the next morning at breakfast he said, 'Coretta, you have been a real soldier. You were the only one who stood with me.'" Had she not done so, the bus boycott and the emerging Civil Rights Movement might have turned out very differently.

DOLORES CLARA FERNÁNDEZ HUERTA

[Dolores Clara Fernández Huerta](#) is an American labor leader and civil rights activist who co-founded the United Farm Workers of America union. By organizing a five-year grape strike and successful national grape boycotts,

Huerta fought for better wages, unemployment compensation, discontinuance of dangerous pesticides, and things as basic as cold drinking water, rest periods, and toilets in the fields.

- **Quote:** “We can do it. I can do it. Sí se puede.”
- **Cost:** Huerta was arrested dozens of times at strikes and during nonviolent activities. In 1988, “a police officer broke several of her ribs and pulverized her spleen during a peaceful protest in San Francisco against then-presidential candidate George H.W. Bush’s policies and platform.”
- **Results:** As a result of the strikes and boycotts, California growers were forced in 1970 to pay higher wages and offer better working conditions to farm workers. Huerta also helped achieve California’s landmark 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which gave the state’s farm workers the right to unionize and engage in collective bargaining.

What do you think?

- *Why is it important for women to be actively involved in protest and activism?*
- *Who are some examples of people today who are working for justice and fairness? How far should they go to accomplish their goals?*