

The Post-Umbrella Movement, Biblical Interpretation, and Unity of the Church

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The Umbrella Movement (originally coined as Umbrella Revolution)¹ was a civil disobedience movement in Hong Kong (HK) from September 26 to December 15, 2014. The movement was a campaign initiated by students. It was a protest against the decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) regarding proposed electoral reform that was highly restrictive and consisted of pre-screening by the Chinese Communist Party. It also asked the HK government to keep their promise and let HK people have genuine universal suffrage in 2017. Several leading parties of the movement include the Hong Kong Federation of Students, Scholarism, and Occupy Central with Love and Peace (Occupy Central). The movement did not succeed, and there was no change to the NPCSC's decision. Ironically, due to the mistake of the pro-government camp, the proposed reform was rejected by the Hong Kong Legislative Council.

The Umbrella Movement was not a Christian movement, but it was closely related to, and has caused much disturbance, among Christians. On the one hand, Christians are linked to the movement as some of the leaders are Christians: the Convenor of Scholarism, Joshua Wong, along with two of the three main advocates of Occupy Central, Benny Tai and Rev. Yiu-ming Chu. On the other hand, the movement caused much disturbance among Christians. One of the major debates revolved around the question of whether Christians should join the Umbrella Movement. This kind of debate has led to the destruction of some relationships among Christians. Churches and organizations organized talks and seminars that advocated for reconciliation. As a Hong Konger who is studying Christian theology, I would like to provide some reflections concerning civil disobedience and biblical interpretation, the post-Umbrella Movement, and the unity of the Church.

Civil Disobedience and Biblical Interpretation

One of the major debates aroused by the movement revolved around whether or not it is appropriate for Christians to engage in said movement. To respond to this question, we have to identify the nature of the movement. Civil disobedience,² as defined by John Rawls, is "a public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government. By acting in this way one addresses the sense of justice of the majority of the community and declares that in one's considered opinion the principles of social cooperation among free and equal men are not being respected."³

¹ Some people have argued whether the movement should be called "movement" or "revolution." This article is not going to deal with this problem but will use the term "movement."

² The concept of civil disobedience had already been introduced to the public of HK by the Occupy Central Movement before the Umbrella Movement has taken place. See 戴耀廷等著, 《公民抗命與佔領中環》。

³ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 364. Hugo A. Bedau has a very similar definition on civil disobedience. See Bedau, "On Civil Disobedience," 661.

According to this definition, the Umbrella Movement can be defined as civil disobedience. Therefore, we will move forward to the discussion of whether Christians may engage in civil disobedience.

When we ponder whether Christians may engage in civil disobedience, there are two facets that we should consider. One is whether Christians should engage in social action while the other is concerned with resisting the government. Christians advocating for social action have always been a controversial topic. Some Christians think that Christians should stay away from politics. Others, like John Stott and Ronald Sider, have argued for the legitimacy of Christians engaging in social action by looking at its biblical basis.⁴ According to Stott, social action means political involvement, in which working for legislative change is an essential part.⁵ Like other debates in theology, Christians have not arrived at a consensus on every detail of theological issues concerning social action. There are ongoing debates concerning how to interpret related biblical passages. Even though there are some Christians in HK who are against any social action, this is not the main dispute in HK. In fact, the social and political participation of the HK Church is a topic that has aroused discussion for more than half a century.⁶ Many Christians are already engaging in different kinds of social and political participation.⁷

The other facet related to civil disobedience is concerned with resisting the government,⁸ especially as it relates to understanding Romans 13:1–7. Some pastors and believers claim that according to this passage, Christians should show absolute submission to the government. Therefore, any kind of civil disobedience is prohibited. Other pastors and believers contend that the kind of submission this passage calls for is limited to a government that is just; one does not need to submit to authorities that are corrupt and unjust. Hence, this passage does not forbid Christians from civil disobedience. This passage is among one of the most controversial passages in the Bible concerning Christian political ethics. There are numerous ways of interpreting these verses. As a result, there is no consensus among interpreters.⁹

Even though the Umbrella Movement has ended, the need for HK Christians to reflect on the topic of civil disobedience and biblical interpretation has not ended. From the above discussion, we can see that when we examine the dispute concerning social action and civil disobedience, the question of how to interpret the Bible have played a main role. Concerning biblical interpretation, as Grant Osborne has stated, “a purely ‘objective’ approach that re-creates the original situation without recourse to the modern preunderstanding is exceedingly difficult, indeed impossible. The act of interpretation itself is done from within a cultural and theological

⁴ See Stott, *Contemporary Christian*, 343–49; Sider, *Good News*, 49–154; and Sider, *Scandal of the Conscience*, 57–82.

⁵ Stott, *Contemporary Christian*, 349–50.

⁶ For a discussion concerning the social and political participation of HK Church, see Kwok, *Self-Defence or Social Concern* (in Chinese).

⁷ Apart from social concern and services, even among those churches that basically do not support the Umbrella Movement, they have members who involve in political activity. For examples, Paul Kwong, the current Archbishop and Primate of Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui/Hong Kong Anglican Church (Episcopal), is one of the members of Chinese CPCC National Committee members in HK; there are also others who are government officials or Legislative Council members.

⁸ A book (in Chinese) has been published concerning civil disobedience and Occupy Central Movement. This book is a Christian reflection concerning the topic, and has approached the topic from different perspectives like biblical, theological and historical perspectives. See 戴耀廷等著, 《公民抗命與佔領中環》。

⁹ For a concise survey of interpretation and a linguistic based interpretation of the passage, see Porter, “Romans 13:1–7,” 115–37.

framework.”¹⁰ Given these, as biblical interpreters, we ought to recognize that each of our interpretation has its own presuppositions. Once we recognize our own bias, there is a readiness to be open and charitable towards others as we try to refine and define the best possible interpretation. As Osborne opines, all doctrinal statements “should be made on the basis of all the texts that speak to the issue rather than on the basis of proof-texts or ‘favorite’ passages.”¹¹ He adds, “the interpreter must recognize that an understanding of the history and culture within which the passage was produced is an indispensable tool for uncovering the meaning of that passage.”¹² When we consider whether Christians may engage in civil disobedience, we must look at the teachings of the whole Bible as well as the historical and cultural background of each particular passage.

The Post-Umbrella Movement and the Unity of the Church

The Umbrella Movement has ended for more than a year. However, its repercussions can still be felt. Recently, a newspaper in HK has reported the withdrawal of Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui/Hong Kong Anglican Church (Episcopal) (SKH) as the supporting church of the Divinity School of Chung Chi College (Chung Chi), and related the move to political reasons.¹³ It has aroused much conjecture among Christians. Even though the withdrawal as a supporting church is a fact, several people from SKH and Chung Chi have refuted the claim that it is related to political reasons. We are not going to examine the issue here, but this incident shows that the relationship among Christians is still influenced by the current political atmosphere. The unity of the Church in HK is still under crisis.

Church unity does not mean that all churches should become the same or hold the same viewpoints. In fact, we can see that Jesus prayed for unity amidst diversity (John 17:6–19).¹⁴ Even though this kind of unity is not easy to accomplish, we should try our best to achieve it. Our political viewpoints should not serve as a hindrance to the call for the Church to be a united body in Christ. While we may have diverse political standpoints, we must continue to strive for unity. We can disagree with another person but we cannot hate the other person.

The Umbrella Movement has caused much debate among Christians in HK. Different interpretations of Biblical passages have caused divisions in terms of determining the appropriate Christian response to certain situations. However, if we admit the complexity surrounding biblical interpretation and recognize our own limitations, we will be more open to examining other ideas and viewpoints. It is important to have discussions with others that do not devolve into feelings of hatred for the other. Although we may have diverse political views, unity within the Church should always take priority.

¹⁰ Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 367–68.

¹¹ Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 11.

¹² Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 127.

¹³ *Apple Daily*, May 7, 2016. See <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/realtime/news/20160507/55072500>

¹⁴ To put it simply, Jesus prayed for his believers and among his disciples, there consists of Simon, who was called the Zealot (Luke 6:15) and “the disciple,” who was known to and has shown close relationship with the high priest (John 18:16). These can be seen as two different political positions.

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