

1-1-1974

Christian Obedience

Keith Esch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Esch, Keith (1974) "Christian Obedience," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 39 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol39/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Christian Obedience

KEITH ESCH

OBEDIENCE AND GRACE

Obedience is a hard word to work with. It is a harsh term, demanding and unequivocal, a term which seems relentless and almost inhuman. It carries with it images of tyranny, of autocracy, of dictatorship. However, obedience is also an important biblical idea; and even though obedience often runs counter to our inclinations and desires, true obedience to God grows out of a deep sense of his acts of grace. Christian obedience is more an expression of thanksgiving than of obligation.

Obedience, as a response to God's grace, is expressed in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. The people of God in Israel were not only aware of the demands that Yahweh placed on them; they were also deeply conscious of his acts of grace. For example, the Decalogue does not begin with "Thou shalt . . ."; rather, the commandments are prefaced with the words: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex. 20:2; all biblical quotations are from NEB).

Jesus is our best example of one who was apparently fully obedient. His sense of relationship with God was so complete that when he spoke of God he used the intimate term, "Abba." To him, God was not an ogre or a tyrant. He was Papa!

OBEDIENCE AND SALVATION

Obedience, as a response to God's grace, is clearly a consequence of salvation. But when we remember that salvation means wholeness, completeness, fullness of life, it becomes clear that salvation is also a consequence of obedience. One who obeys God is doing his will, and it is those who do his will who experience the true meaning of fullness of life.

God's will is wholeness, not only for the individual, but for the universe. Thus, we note the strong biblical emphasis on the saving effect of those who are obedient. For only a few, Sodom could have been saved (Gen. 18:22-33).

The Lord's word to Abraham in Genesis 22:18 was that "all nations on earth shall pray to be blessed as your descendants are blessed, and this because you have obeyed me." Hebrews 5:8-9 indicates that Christ's obedience results in salvation for the world: "Son though he was, he learned obedience in the school of suffering, and, once perfected, became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

OBEDIENCE AND ACTION

Obedience is both faith and action. But what is the action? We must be clear that not all that well-intentioned people do is necessarily within the framework of obedience. Sincerity is not a sufficient condition for obedience, for we can be sincerely mistaken! In Luke 4 we find some help regarding the content of obedient action. The story, as it is recorded, is exciting:

Jesus, armed with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee; and reports about him spread through the whole country-side. He taught in their synagogues and all men sang his praises.

So he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went to synagogue on the Sabbath day as he regularly did. He stood up to read the lesson and was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the scroll and found the passage which says,

'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has
anointed me;
he has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight
for the blind;
to let the broken victims go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Lk. 4:14-19)

Up to this point Jesus was in good standing in his community. He was only reading the Bible, doing the kind of thing all

respectable religious people do. But later, when he began *behaving* like a prophet rather than simply quoting the prophet, then he was no longer acceptable!

This story suggests that anyone who would respond to God's grace in obedience must do so not only with a prayerful "thank you" and all the other commendable religious acts; there must also be an active involvement with the needs of the world. The action that Jesus outlines and follows suggests the wholeness of Yahweh's concern for the world. After his escape from the infuriated crowd in the synagogue, Jesus went on his way teaching, casting out demons and healing. This activity is described as giving "the good news of the kingdom of God" (Lk. 4:43). Obedience means acting in faithfulness, so that the good news of the kingdom will be given. While this passage does not spell out in any detail what specific persons will be doing at particular times and places, it does clearly indicate that obedience to Yahweh will involve us in the goals of his kingdom — goals which are often in sharp contrast with those of the world in general, goals which relate to the needs of the world.

OBEDIENCE AND THE CHURCH

God's grace provides not only the motivation for obedience, but the means for obedience as well. One of the resources of the grace of God is the company of his people, the church. While it is true that the church is a community of those who hear and obey God, it is also true that the church facilitates obedience.

An example of this can be seen in the early church. It was clear to those first-generation Christians that Jesus meant what he said when he warned them about the dangers of riches. They were not to lay up treasures on earth. They were not to worry about food and clothing, because their heavenly father would provide.

How were they enabled to take seriously this teaching about treasure? Clearly it was the action of the beloved community that made it possible. What they "owned" as

individuals became available for everyone, and in this way each one's need was provided for (Acts 4:32-37). If the practice of the early church teaches us anything about treasure, it teaches us that the means of conformity to the values of Jesus is through being a member of the church. If to be obedient to Christ we must not store up treasures on earth, then we must have an alternative means for meeting our needs. The church, when it is true to its calling, is such an alternative and is a means of God's grace enabling us to be obedient to his will.

The church also enables us to be obedient in ministry to the world. Earlier we noted Jesus' ministry as recorded in Luke. It is clear that he intended that his followers would carry on his ministry. The ministry of Jesus is as broad in scope as the universe and as varied as the needs of the universe. Clearly, as individuals, we cannot faithfully carry out his command to continue his ministry. The needs are too varied and complex. But as a part of the body of Christ we can be obedient, for it is the body, corporately, that ministers in the world.

The problem with the church as an institution is that its values and goals frequently become confused, so that it is disobedient. It tries to give messages that will placate the hearers, rather than to engage in its true ministry of healing, of casting out demons, and of teaching.

What is the proper response to this tendency? The only answer is to repent! Experience a radical change of mind and spirit, with the result that values and goals will be radically changed. In some cases creating a new structure, a new institution, a new movement may prove to be useful. The Anabaptists, the Quakers, and movements before and since have arisen to challenge the institutional church to greater faithfulness. They did not replace the church as such, nor were they alternatives to it. Rather, they were and are a part of the on-going body of Christ in history.

The faithful church continues the ministry of Jesus in our time. The place where this best functions is in the local meeting. The local meeting is called in obedience to minister to the poor, the broken-hearted, the imprisoned. It is also

called to demonstrate the values of the kingdom of God and to confront the world with those values. Each individual member carries responsibility for the ministry which is uniquely his or hers as a faithful member of Christ's body. However, each individual member fulfills his or her responsibility to obedience, not alone but as part of a great company.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, obedience is a positive response to God's love, an integral part of the experience of salvation. Obedience is not only intent but action, action that requires involvement in the work of God's kingdom. Finally, the nature of Christian obedience is such that the beloved community, the church, is required for its accomplishment.