

Obedience Unto Christ -- the Nature and Causes of It

by John Owen

Obedience to Christ is a subjection of the soul and conscience to him, based on his divine nature and mediatorial role, and is required for acceptance with God.

Scripture: Matthew 5:17, John 14:15, Romans 14:10

Topics: "Authority of Christ", "Obedience to Christ"

Description

John Owen emphasizes the significance of obedience to Christ, asserting that true obedience stems from a heartfelt submission to His authority rather than mere compliance with rules. He clarifies that while the moral law remains unchanged, Christ confirmed it and provided new directives for worship, establishing His role as the ultimate lawgiver. Owen argues that obedience is not just about following commands but is rooted in recognizing Christ's divine nature and authority. He warns against the neglect of obedience, which is often overlooked in theological debates, and stresses that all moral duties must be performed in faith through Christ to be acceptable to God. Ultimately, Owen calls believers to acknowledge Christ's authority in both moral and worship practices, as all judgment and accountability rest with Him.

Transcript

II. All holy obedience, both internal and external is that which we proposed as the second part of our religious regard unto the person of Christ. His great injunction unto his disciples is, "That they keep his commandments" -- without which, none are so.

135Some say the Lord Christ is to be considered as a lawgiver, and the Gospel as a new law given by him, whereby our obedience unto him is to be regulated. Some absolutely deny it, and will not grant the Gospel in any sense to be a new law. And many dispute about these things, whilst obedience itself is on all hands generally neglected. But this is that wherein our principal concernment doth lie. I shall not, therefore, at present, immix myself in any needless disputations. Those things wherein the nature and necessity of our obedience unto him is concerned, shall be briefly declared.

The law under the Old Testament, taken generally, had two parts, -- first, the moral preceptive part of it; and, secondly, the institutions of worship appointed for that season. These are jointly and distinctly called the law.

In respect unto the first of these, the Lord Christ gave no new law, nor was the old abrogated by him -- which it must be if another were given in the room of it, unto the same ends. For the introduction of a new law in the place of and unto the end of a former, is an actual abrogation of it. Neither did he add any new precepts unto it, nor give any counsels for the performance of duties in matter or manner beyond what it prescribed. Any such supposition is contrary to the wisdom and holiness of God in giving the law, and inconsistent with the nature of the law itself. For God never required less of us in the law than all that was due unto him; and his prescription of it included all circumstances and causes that might render any duty at any time necessary in the nature or degree of it. Whatever at any time may become the duty of any person towards God, in the substance or degrees of it, it is made so by the law. All is included in that summary of it, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbour as thyself." Nothing can be the duty of men but what and when it is required by the love of God or our neighbour. Wherefore, no additions were made unto the preceptive part of the law by our Saviour, nor counsels given by him for the performance of more than it did require.

In this regard the Gospel is no new law; -- only the duties of the moral and eternal law are plainly declared in the doctrine of it, enforced in its motives, and directed as to their manner and end. Nor in this sense did the Lord Christ ever declare himself to be a new lawgiver; yea, he declares the contrary -- that he came to confirm the old, Matt. v. 17.

Secondly, The law may be considered as containing the institutions of worship which were given in Horeb by Moses, with other statutes and judgments. It was in this sense abolished by Christ. For the things themselves were appointed but unto the time of reformation. And thereon, as the supreme Lord and lawgiver of the Gospel Church, he gave a new law of worship, consisting in several institutions and ordinances of worship thereunto belonging. See Heb. iii. 3-6, and our explanation of that place.

Obedience unto the Lord Christ may be considered with respect unto both these; -- the moral law which he confirmed, and the law of evangelical worship which he gave and appointed. And some few things may be added to clear the nature of it.

1. Obedience unto Christ doth not consist merely in doing the things which he requireth. So far the church under the Old Testament was obliged to yield obedience unto Moses; and we are yet so unto the prophets and apostles This is done, or may be so, with respect unto any subordinate directive cause of our obedience, when it is not formally so denominated from his authority. All obedience unto Christ proceeds from an express subjection of our souls and consciences unto him.

2. No religious obedience could be due unto the Lord Christ directly, by the rule and command of the moral law, were he not God by nature also. The reason and foundation of all the obedience required therein is, "I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me." This contains the formal reason of our religious obedience. The Socinians pretend highly unto obedience to the precepts of Christ; but all obedience unto Christ himself they utterly overthrow. The obedience they pretend unto him, is but obeying God the Father according to his commands; but they take away the foundation of all obedience unto his person, by denying his divine nature. And all religious obedience unto any who is not God by nature, is idolatry. Wherefore, all obedience unto God, due by the moral law, hath respect unto the person of Christ, as one God with the Father and Holy Spirit, blessed for ever.

3. There is a peculiar respect unto him in all moral obedience as Mediator.

(1.) In that by the supreme authority over the church wherewith he was vested, he hath confirmed all the commands of the moral law, giving them new enforcements; whence he calls them his commands. "This," saith he, "is my commandment, That ye love one another;" which yet was the old commandment of the moral law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Hence the apostle calls it an old and new commandment, 1 John ii. 7, 8.

This law was given unto the church under the Old Testament in the hand of a mediator; that is, of Moses, Gal. iii. 19. It had an original power of obliging all mankind unto obedience, from its first institution or prescription in our creation; which it never lost nor abated in. Howbeit the church was obliged to have a respect unto it, as it was given unto them, "ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator." 137 See Mal. iv. 4. Hereon many things hard and difficult did ensue, which we are now freed from. We are not obliged unto the observance of the moral law itself, as given in the hand of that mediator, which gave it the formal reason of a covenant unto that people, and had other statutes and judgments inseparable from it. But the same law continueth still in its original authority and power, which it had from the beginning, to oblige all indispensably unto obedience.

Howbeit, as the Church of Israel, as such, was not obliged unto obedience unto the moral law absolutely considered, but as it was given unto them peculiarly in the hand of a mediator -- that is, of Moses; no more is the Evangelical Church, as such, obliged by the original authority of that law, but as it is confirmed unto us in the hand of our Mediator. This renders all our moral obedience evangelical. For there is no duty of it, but we are obliged to perform it in faith through Christ, on the motives of the love of God in him, of the benefits of his mediation, and the grace we receive by him: whatever is otherwise done by us is not acceptable unto God.

They do, therefore, for the most part, but deceive themselves and others, who talk so loudly about moral duties. I know of none that are acceptable unto God, which are not only materially, but formally so, and no more.

If the obligation they own unto them be only the original power of the moral law, or the law of our creation, and they are performed in the strength of that law unto the end of it, they are no way accepted of God. But if they intend the duties which the moral law requireth, proceeding from, and performed by, faith in Christ, upon the grounds of the love of God in him, and grace received from him -- then are they duties purely evangelical. And although the law hath never lost, nor ever can lose, its original power of obliging us unto universal obedience, as we are reasonable creatures; yet is our obedience unto it as Christians, as believers, immediately influenced by its confirmation unto the Evangelical Church in the hand of our Mediator. For --

(2.) God hath given unto the Lord Christ all power in his name, to require this obedience from all that receive the Gospel. Others are left under the original authority of the Law, either as implanted in our natures at their first creation, as are the Gentiles; or as delivered by Moses, and written in tables of stone, as it was with the Jews, Rom. ii. 12-15. But as unto them that are called unto the faith of the Gospel, the authority of Christ doth immediately affect their minds and consciences. "He feeds" or rules his people "in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God," Micah v. 4. All the authority and majesty of God is in him 138 and with him; -- so of old, as the great Angel of God's presence, he was in the church in the wilderness with a delegated power, Exod. xxiii. 20-22: "Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared: beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions: for my name is in him. But if thou

shalt indeed obey his voice, and do all that I speak," &c. The name of God the Father is so in him -- that is, he is so partaker of the same nature with him -- that his voice is the voice of the Father: "If thou obey his voice, and do all that I speak." Nevertheless, he acts herein as the Angel of God, with power and authority delegated from him. So is he still immediately present with the church, requiring obedience in the name and majesty of God.

(3.) All judgment upon and concerning this obedience is committed unto him by the Father: "For the Father judgeth no man," (that is, immediately as the Father,) "but hath committed all judgment unto the Son," John v. 22; He "hath given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man," verse 27. And his judgment is the judgment of God; for the Father, who judgeth none immediately in his own person, judgeth all in him, 1 Peter i. 17: "If ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work." He doth so in and by the Son, unto whom all judgment is committed. And unto him are we to have regard in all our obedience, unto whom we must give our account concerning it, and by whom we are and must be finally judged upon it. To this purpose speaks the apostle, Rom. xiv. 10-12, "We shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." He proveth that we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ, or be judged by him, by a testimony of Scripture that we shall be also judged by God himself, and give an account of ourselves unto him. And as this doth undeniably prove and confirm the divine nature of Christ, without the faith whereof there is neither cogency in the apostle's testimony nor force in his arguing; so he declares that God judgeth us only in and by him. In this regard of our moral obedience unto Christ lies the way whereby God will be gloried.

Secondly, All things are yet more plain with respect unto institutions of divine worship. The appointment of all divine ordinances under the New Testament was his especial province and work, as the Son and Lord over his own house; and obedience unto him in the observance of them is that which he gives in especial charge unto all his disciples, Matt. xxviii. 18-20. And it is nothing but a loss of 139that subjection of soul and conscience unto him which is indispensably required of all believers, that hath set the minds of so many at liberty to do and observe in divine worship what they please, without any regard unto his institutions. It is otherwise with respect unto moral duties; for the things of the moral law have an obligation on our consciences antecedent unto the enforcement of them by the authority of Christ, and there hold us fast. But as unto things of the latter sort, our consciences can no way be affected with a sense of them, or a necessity of obedience in them, but by the sole and immediate authority of Christ himself. If a sense hereof be lost in our minds, we shall not abide in the observance of his commands.

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