

The Obedience of Faith

Synopsis

In this article I trace how those who argue that the believer is not under the law of Christ, and that the Scriptures are not part of the law of Christ, but who emphasise the inward work of the Spirit at the expense of the believer's deliberate obedience to the commands of Scripture, end up with a view of progressive sanctification that is very similar to the hyper-Calvinistic view of conversion.

Introduction

Paul could not have been more explicit in the opening remarks of the letter to the Romans:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1-6).

Paul's readers (hearers) could have been left in no doubt as to the apostle's purpose, both in life and this letter: he wanted to bring as many as possible to 'the obedience of faith'. And, in saying this, he was thinking not only of unbelievers. As he so plainly stated, God had commissioned him 'to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, *including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ*'. Clearly, he wanted believers, as well as unbelievers, to come to 'the obedience of faith', to produce 'the obedience of faith'. He knew that this was God's work for him, this was God's purpose for his ministry.

Whatever was he talking about? What was he consumed by? What is ‘the obedience of faith’?

Speaking of unbelievers, can there be any doubt that the apostle wanted them to hear the gospel, yield to it, submit to Christ, obey the call, invitation and command to repent and believe and so be saved? Of course not. Obedience to the gospel command is a vital aspect of conversion (Acts 5:32; Rom. 2:8; 2 Thess. 1:8; Heb. 5:9; 12:25; 1 Pet. 1:2,22; 3:1; 4:17). It is precisely what we want today, is it not? We want to carry out our Lord’s standing commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47), and preach the gospel to all in order to see as many sinners as possible converted to Christ, as many sinners as possible brought to ‘the obedience of faith’. May we live to see ‘the word of God continue to increase, and the number of the disciples multiply greatly... and a great many... become obedient to the faith’ (see Acts 6:7). ‘The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ’ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).¹ As far as unbelievers go, this is ‘the obedience of faith’.

¹ This note applies to this paragraph and the next. John Gill: The person thus affected ‘clearly sees Christ to be the alone, able, willing, full, and suitable Saviour, and so becomes obedient to him, both as a Saviour and a King. Such an enlightened soul looks to him alone for life and salvation, ventures on him, and relies upon him, and is desirous and willing to be saved by him in his own way. He receives and embraces all his truths and doctrines with faith and love, and obeys them from the heart, and cheerfully and willingly submits to all his commands and ordinances. For though he is taken by the grace of God, and all his strongholds, reasonings, and high thoughts are demolished by the power of God in the gospel, and he himself is carried captive, yet [it is] not against but with his will [that he is made] to be a voluntary subject of Christ, and cheerfully to submit to the sceptre of his kingdom’. M.R.Vincent in his *Word Studies in the New Testament*: ‘The obedience is the new stronghold into which the captives are led. This is indicated by the preposition *eis* “into” or “unto”’. Do not miss how all this follows hard upon 2 Cor. 9:13. See the following note.

But what about believers? Is it not clear that the apostle wanted them to live holy, Christ-like, sanctified lives by believing, submitting to, and obeying Scripture? Of course. Obedience to gospel commands is a vital aspect of progressive sanctification (2 Cor. 2:9; 9:13; 10:4-5; 7:15; 10:6; Gal. 5:7; 2 Thess. 3:14; Philem. 1:21; see faith and works linked in Heb. 11:1-40; Jas. 2:14-26).² This is what Paul was talking about. So he knew what he had to do. He had to set out the gospel to inform his readers' minds, yes. But, more than that, he wanted to inform their minds in order to stir their hearts and, in this way, move their wills to obedience to the gospel, to get them to work out its consequences in daily life, and to put it into practice. This is why he wrote his letter to the Romans. And this is what we find. Putting it simplistically, we may say that in the first eleven chapters of his letter the apostle sets out his doctrine, and in the last five chapters he issues his call, and gives his commands, to the believers for their obedience.³ All this he makes clear right from the start. Could anything be more patent? As far as believers go, this is 'the obedience of faith'.

In light of what is to come, let me stress this. The apostolic way of producing 'the obedience of faith' was to preach the gospel and write Scripture. Naturally, as far as we are concerned, the latter was completed by the apostles, but the standing principle is as plain as a pikestaff: the Scriptures are right at the heart of 'the obedience of faith'. And our mission, as believers, is to do what we can to bring about this 'obedience of faith' – in the conversion of sinners, and the progressive sanctification of saints, beginning with ourselves.

Referring to Matthew 28:18-20, John Piper put it this way:

² As for 2 Cor. 9:13, see previous note. Paul describes their generosity thus: 'Your submission [obedience, NIV, NASB] that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ' (2 Cor. 9:13). 'You yield yourselves in willing subjection to the gospel precepts, evinced in acts, as well as in profession' (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown).

³ Compare the first three and the last three chapters of Ephesians.

The aim of Christian missions is to cause people to obey a new Commander. [Progressive] sanctification is happening where the words of Jesus are being obeyed.⁴

And those ‘words of Jesus’, and all they encompass, are found in Scripture – Matthew 28:18-20 in the first instance, but *in toto* from Genesis to Revelation as nuanced by the apostles.

Getting back to Romans: Paul clearly felt himself impelled by Christ’s commission to bring all to ‘the obedience of faith’. He was a driven man. Take Romans as a case in point. As he moves through the letter, although he does not repeatedly use the phrase, nevertheless he keeps returning to ‘the obedience of faith’, and that by sinners and saints. You can sense how intensely he felt the ‘burden’ (responsibility) of it, so vital a matter was it to him. Paul wrote Romans – the pinnacle of Scripture – with this as his stated purpose!

Take Romans 6. Having explained that believers are united to Christ, he immediately moves to the consequences of this massive truth, issuing commands and backing them up with an extended and powerful argument:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (Rom. 6:12-19).

⁴ John Piper: ‘How the Spirit Sanctifies’, a sermon on Rom. 15:14-21.

And so on. It is all here: scriptural exposition to give light to the mind, to warm the heart and thus call for submission of will and obedience of life. In other words, ‘the obedience of faith’.

Take Romans 8:12, where the apostle states that believers are ‘debtors’; that is, they are obligated (see NIV, NASB). The word *opheiletai* is emphatic. Paul is speaking of those who are ‘held by obligation’ and the consequent ‘duty of people who owe’.⁵ Naturally, he includes himself. As he had explained right from the start of the letter, he too was a debtor, he had an obligation: ‘I am under obligation (*opheiletēs*) both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome’ (Rom. 1:14-15). He knew that it was by the preaching of the gospel that he could bring sinners and saints to ‘the obedience of faith’,⁶ and he was under ‘obligation’ to do all he could to bring it about.

Having made sure that he had placed that firmly on the record, on reaching Romans 8, Paul links himself with his readers to declare: ‘So then, brothers, we are debtors (*opheiletai*), not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh’ (Rom. 8:12). He is telling the Romans the same as the Galatians: ‘If [since] we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:25), let us walk in the Spirit. Now, as I have explained elsewhere,⁷ this ‘walking in the Spirit’ cannot be divorced from determined – though willing and joyful – submission to the Scriptures. The two go hand in hand. No man – sinner or saint – can obey Scripture but by the Spirit, and no man walking in the Spirit can do anything other than regard Scripture as his sovereign rule and guide. Thankfully, in the new covenant, not only is the law of Christ written on the believer’s heart *and* in the Scriptures, but every believer has the Spirit. Thus, in Romans 8 and in Galatians 5 – 6, having set out the doctrine of the gospel in writing Scripture, the apostle is calling for obedience of life on the basis

⁵ See Thayer. *opheilō* is ‘to must’, to have to, to have a duty to.

⁶ As I have explained times without number, preaching is more than ‘pulpit work’.

⁷ See my ‘Believers Under the Law of Christ’. My articles may all be found under the eDocs link on my page on sermonaudio.com.

of what he has written. Calling for it? He is demanding it! He is commanding his readers to obey! Do not misread the ‘let us’ of Galatians 5:25; it is explained by the ‘obligation’ of Romans 8:12. He is calling for ‘the obedience of faith’; he is writing expressly to get it. Scripture is at the heart of it.

Still he has not exhausted the theme. Take Romans 12. After setting out, in the first eleven chapters of the letter, the most glorious statement of the gospel in all Scripture, the apostle comes to this:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2).

He appeals for obedience on the basis of his doctrine. But, once again, do not misread the apostle. He might ‘appeal’, but the apostolic appeal is nothing less than a command! ‘In light of the gospel, live lives that reflect it’. This is what he is commanding. He wants ‘the obedience of faith’. He is calling for it, demanding it.

And so it goes on, right to the end of the letter. Look how the apostle closes, not forgetting the way he had opened the letter:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Rom. 16:25-27).

‘The obedience of faith’! There is no mistaking it: one of the chief ends of the gospel ministry is to bring both sinners and saints to ‘the obedience of faith’. This end is the responsibility that Christ laid on the apostle, right from his conversion, and it explains the apostle’s life-long ‘obligation’ (Rom. 1:14-15). As Christ had made clear to him:

I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Paul knew what this entailed. As he told Agrippa:

Therefore... I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance (Acts 20:16-20).

Do not miss the final clause. Paul did not want conversions in the sense of ‘making a decision’. He wanted real conversion leading to life-long obedience to reflect the reality of the repentance. And he wrote and taught Scripture for it, issuing commands in the name of Christ to sinners for their conversion, and then to the converts for their progressive sanctification. It is just as the Lord himself had said at the close of his own earthly ministry:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

As I have explained, the believer’s obedience to the externally written Scriptures arises from the inward writing of the law of Christ in his heart, in the power of the Spirit. *Both the inward and the outward are vital.* The fact that Paul sets all this out so clearly in writing this letter to the Romans is a clear demonstration of it.

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones on Romans 7:6 raised a very important question: ‘What are the differences, in detail, between life lived “in the Spirit” and the old way of living “according to the writing” and “under the law” and “in the flesh”?’ He answered it thus:

First, there is the difference between an external and an internal relationship to the law of God, in other words, to morality. This difference is well described in 2 Corinthians 3:3, where Paul says: ‘Forasmuch as you are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God’. Before, it was, as it were, a writing ‘with ink’, but it is no longer that, it is now a writing with the Spirit. But, further, ‘not in tables of stone’ – that is something outside you. Well, where is the writing now? In ‘fleshy tables of the heart’. The old law was outside a man, written on stones, written with ink, something you looked at with your physical eyes. That is no longer the position. It is now engraven and written and implanted in the fleshy tables of the heart, in the very centre of the personality, in the deepest recesses of our being. We are no longer looking at something outside ourselves, we are considering something that is already within us, and working within us. Hebrews 8 states it. The author is quoting what Jeremiah had said in the 31st chapter of his prophecy. God says that he is going to make a new covenant with the people – ‘not the old covenant that I made with your fathers’, but a ‘new covenant’. What are the characteristics of the new covenant? ‘I will put my laws into their minds, and write them in their hearts’. Before, he had put the laws on tables of stone which he handed to Moses, and Moses brought them down to the people. But in the new covenant he is going to ‘put (his) laws into their minds, and (imprint) write them in their hearts’.

Here we meet with a fundamental distinction between the two covenants, the two ways of life. Before you become truly Christian you try to conform to a standard and a pattern outside yourself; but to be a Christian means that the standard is inside you. Of course, in one sense it is still outside, *but the important fact is that it is now inside as well.*⁸ You read it in the Word, but it is also in your mind and in your heart. You are not only looking at something external, you are also aware of that which is within. You do not have to be persuaded to look at that which is outside you; there is now a power within you calling your attention to it, a principle operating in the centre of your personality. The same truth is stated in Philippians 2:13: ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God that works in you (inside you) both to will and to do of his good pleasure’. The apostle rejoices that we have become dead to the

⁸ My emphasis.

law, and that we are delivered from the law which formerly held us because we can now serve ‘in newness of Spirit, not in the oldness of the writing’. It is within us, in our minds and in our hearts.

Lloyd-Jones, of course, was addressing a congregation already persuaded of the priority of the written word. Consequently, he rightly stressed the inward work of the Spirit writing the law of Christ on the believer’s heart. But in light of what I am talking about here, the same doctrine needs to be stressed the other way round. Both the inward and outward are essential for ‘the obedience of faith’.

‘The obedience of faith’. Obedience to what? Obedience to Scripture under the impulse of the Spirit. It is this unbreakable link between faith and obedience to Scripture that I now want to develop.

Faith and obedience linked

While the following extract from Romans concerns unbelievers coming to Christ, the underlying principle is precisely the same for the believer.⁹ Paul made the point I am trying to stress, thus:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without someone preaching?
And how are they to preach unless they are sent?... But they have not all obeyed the gospel... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:14-17).

Paul preached the gospel to bring sinners to faith; that is, to obey the gospel, submit to Christ, obey Christ, receive Christ as Saviour and Lord.¹⁰ And we know what he meant by ‘preaching the gospel’:

⁹ I have already made the link; or, rather, as I have shown, Paul did right at the start of Romans.

¹⁰ ‘The word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith’ (Acts 6:7).

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ... I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God... I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom... I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God... For three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:20-32).

Notice that the apostle was talking about his approach to both sinners and saints. Furthermore, do not miss the way he concluded this parting address, commending the saints to God and Scripture – to both, please note – to bring about their continued edification. And he was not thinking of Scripture merely as a source of information for the children of God!

Clearly, faith and obedience to the gospel, obedience to Scripture, are intimately linked, and indissolubly so. It can be put in the negative. Unbelief is disobedience. The condemning sin for sinners is their refusal to obey the gospel and trust Christ as Saviour and Lord (John 3:18,36; 16:7-9). The reward-losing sin for believers is their refusal to obey the commands issued by Christ and the apostles using all Scripture.¹¹ Unbelief and disobedience – or, faith and obedience – are Siamese twins (Rom. 2:8 with 2 Thess. 2:12, both ESV). The apostle made the link more than once: ‘Just as you [Gentiles] were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their [Israel’s] disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all’ (Rom. 11:30-32). Again: God complained of

¹¹ While the believer will never be condemned for disobedience, he will lose his reward (1 Cor. 3:8,14-15; 4:5).

Israel that through their unbelief they were ‘a disobedient and contrary people’ (Rom. 10:21).

All this applies as much to the believer as to the unbeliever: believers have to produce ‘the obedience of faith’; not to do it is ‘disobedience’. The believer’s ‘obedience of faith’ is his submission to all gospel commands, and the keeping of them. And this law of Christ is written both in the believer’s heart and in Scripture.

Many might be asking themselves: Why make such a song and dance about something so obvious? I agree. Or rather, I did agree until very recently – when I discovered that some new-covenant theologians teach in a way that threatens these principles. They say that the believer is *not* under the law of Christ; rather, he has that law written within him by the Spirit, and while the Spirit moves the believer to obedience to Scripture, it is not as a command, imperative, law or rule. Indeed, Scripture is not an integral part of the law of Christ. Moreover, since the believer has the law of Christ written within his heart, and since the Spirit moves him to obedience, there must be no talk of command, duty or accountability when thinking of the believer’s obedience to Scripture in his progressive sanctification. True, the believer will obey Scripture, must obey Scripture, but there must be no talk of ‘law’ in connection with this.¹² All such talk smacks of ‘bondage’.

This is wrong. The believer *is* under the law of Christ, and Scripture *is* at the heart of that law. And although the Spirit does move the believer to obedience, even so the believer deliberately obeys Scripture, submitting himself to it as God’s commandment and law. It all plays out in ‘the obedience of faith’. When a man believes, who does the believing, who does the obeying of the gospel command? Is it God? Or is it the man himself? Is the man responsible? Or is it down to the Spirit? Is the man active or passive? Is his obedience deliberate, or is it some kind of reflex action under the prompting of the Spirit? Does the man consciously obey the commands of Scripture, or does he do it

¹² In my ‘Believers Under the Law of Christ’ I commented on the illogicality at the heart of this.

incidentally, indirectly? In all this, the doctrine I am writing against ends up with a passive view of progressive sanctification reminiscent of the old Keswick teaching of ‘Let go, and let God’. In fact, it verges towards the hyper-Calvinistic denial of duty faith.

It is this that I wish to examine.

The link with hyper-Calvinism

Let me start at the beginning. As for unbelievers, hyper-Calvinists do not like duty faith. Sinners should not be commanded or invited to trust Christ, they say. Since they are dead in sin, it is not logical to invite or command them to repent and believe. I agree with that last. It isn’t logical. But that’s not the question. Is it biblical? That is the question! And as I have shown elsewhere, duty faith is biblical. Let me remind you of the definition I used in my *The Gospel Offer is Free*:

Duty faith is the duty, the obligation, the responsibility, of all sinners to trust Christ. The gospel preacher must command all sinners to believe.

I then spelled this out:

*A command implies a duty. The gospel commands all sinners to repent; therefore it is their duty to repent. The gospel commands all sinners to believe; therefore it is their duty to believe.*¹³

As far as the unbeliever goes, the hyper-Calvinist argues that since the sinner is dead then he has no responsibility to believe and thus obey the gospel. And that’s the end of the story. The sinner has to wait patiently, passively attend preaching services and ordinances, waiting, hoping, that God might effectually work in him and grant him assurance that he is redeemed. The man

¹³ See my *Offer* (second edition) pp19-34. Please note, it is not the duty of an unconverted sinner to believe that Christ died for him in particular; his duty is to trust Christ. In any case, the sinner cannot know the former until he has done the latter; and even if he could, he would be exercising historical faith, accepting a fact, when what is required is saving faith, reliance upon Christ.

himself has no responsibility to believe, and is not accountable for his unbelief. This is utterly wrong on more than one count.¹⁴

But in this article I am not concerned with duty faith as it applies to the sinner, the unbeliever, but with the duty of *believers* to obey God's commands in Scripture. As I have shown, dealing with the former raises important principles for the latter. It is the believer's duty to obey the commands of Scripture. This obedience is an integral part of being under the law of Christ. In coming to faith in Christ, believers are united to Christ, delivered from the bondage of the Mosaic law, and brought under the easy yoke of their Redeemer. In other words, they are under his law. From the moment of their conversion, as Paul explains in Romans 6:15 – 7:6, they are slaves of Christ, and married to him, subject to his law (Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1). Christ's law is written both on the believer's heart by the indwelling Spirit *and* written in Scripture. The believer, moved by the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, must and will obey his Redeemer and Lord as he has revealed his mind in Scripture.¹⁵

So as to leave no misunderstanding on this, the view that I am disputing says that since the believer has the law of Christ written within his heart, and since the Spirit moves him to obedience, there must be no talk of command, duty or accountability when thinking of the believer's obedience to Scripture in his progressive sanctification. True, the believer will obey Scripture, must obey Scripture, but there must be no talk of 'law' in connection with this. All such talk smacks of 'bondage'. In reply, I say that this teaching has all the makings of a hyper-Calvinistic view of progressive sanctification.

What do I mean by hyper-Calvinism in this regard? Consider this conversation between the Jews and Christ:

¹⁴ As I say, I have dealt with it in my *Offer*. See also my *Septimus Sears: A Victorian Injustice and Its Aftermath; Eternal Justification: Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism; No Safety Before Saving Faith*.

¹⁵ See above and my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law; 'Believers Under the Law of Christ'*, and so on.

‘What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them: ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent’ (John 6:28-29).¹⁶

What did Jesus mean by ‘the work of God’?

Either it is the work which God himself does, or else it is the work God requires men to do. If the former, then since the Jews asked Christ what they had to do (John 6:28), they must have been asking how they could do what only God can do, and Christ told them how to do it. A most remarkable suggestion! Did they want to create? Did they want to rule all nations? Or what? The notion is absurd. We can dismiss it. What is more, Christ’s answer, to ‘believe in him whom he sent’, can hardly be described as God’s own work. Sinners have to believe, not God!¹⁷

But were the Jews thinking in a much more subtle way – were they thinking of saving faith as the work of God in his elect? In other words, were they asking how God would work in them, enabling them to believe? This too we can dismiss. The suggestion that they had reached this level of spiritual understanding, and reached it *before* believing,¹⁸ and were sincerely asking how God would work faith in them, is too much to swallow. Saving faith came into the conversation only *after* the Jews had asked their question about the work of God, and it arose only because Christ raised it. It had not entered the minds of the Jews.

¹⁶ For the next part of this article, I have lightly edited my *Offer* pp43-47.

¹⁷ I acknowledge, of course, the obvious; ‘the works of God’ *can* mean God’s own works. When Jesus told his disciples that the blind man had been born blind so ‘that the works of God should be revealed in him’ (John 9:3), this is precisely what he was talking about. God was going to display *his* works – his compassion, his power, and so on – in giving the man sight. Yes, of course. But Jesus made this very clear by saying the works of God were to be *revealed in* the man; God was about to demonstrate his compassion and his power. But this is very different to John 6:28-29.

¹⁸ They were not spiritual men; the context offers abundant proof of their carnality.

Above all, the idea introduces a dreadful confusion. The Jews were asking about what *they* had to do, not what God would do. The confusion is this: When a sinner believes, who does the believing? Is it the sinner or God? It is the sinner. It can only be the sinner. While faith is the *gift* of God (Eph. 2:8), it is never called the *work* of God. Although God gives faith to the elect sinner, working in him, it is the sinner who believes (Eph. 2:8-10; Phil. 2:12-13). The Holy Spirit does not believe for the sinner; God does not do the believing.

John Gill had it right when he said: ‘It is the convinced sinner, and not God or Christ, or the Spirit, who repents and believes’.¹⁹ ‘Faith... as a principle, is purely God’s work; [but] as it is an act, or as it is exercised under the influence of divine grace, it is man’s act’.²⁰ Yes, indeed, ‘it is man’s act’. The upshot is, even if the Jews were asking about saving faith – which they were not – they were asking about what God required of them, not what he would do in them.

Let me stress this. The fact is, the Jews were not talking about God’s *own* work at all! They wanted to know what *they* had to do. They wanted to know how *they* could please God, what did he require of *them*, what was *their* duty. Indeed, they had asked their question only because Christ had spoken of what they ought to ‘labour’ for (John 6:27). This is what they wanted to know, and this is what Christ told them. The work under discussion was not the work which God *does*, but the work which *pleases* him, the work God *requires*. As Thomas Goodwin put it: ‘By works of

¹⁹ John Gill: *The Cause of God and Truth*, W.H.Collingridge, London, 1855, p112.

²⁰ *Gill’s Commentary*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980, Vol.5 p654. ‘Faith, as it is our act, is our own; hence we read of *his* faith, and *my* faith, and *your* faith, in Scripture’ (John Gill: *Sermons and Tracts*, Old Paths Gospel Press, Choteau, Vol.4 p185, emphasis his). ‘Whilst faith is unquestionably God’s gift, it must be your act’ (Frank White: ‘Should an anxious enquirer be exhorted “to pray”?’..., being an article in: *The Sword and the Trowel...*, edited by C.H.Spurgeon, Passmore and Alabaster, London, 1867, p39).

God they mean works acceptable to God'.²¹ Lexicons tell us it is 'the works required and approved by God, the deeds that God desires'.²² Joseph Henry Alford: "The works of God" must not be taken to mean "the works which God works", but... "the works well pleasing to God".²³ As the NIV translates it: 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' And Jesus, by his answer, was telling them: 'This is your responsibility, this is what you must do to please God, this is what God requires of you, this is the work of God, this is your duty'. 'Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you,²⁴ because God the Father has set his seal on him... This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent' (John 6:27,28). Alford again: 'The meaning is not that faith is wrought in us by God... but... working the work of God is to believe on him whom he has sent'.²⁵ Believing in Christ is that which pleases God, it is what God requires, it is what he demands, it is the sinner's duty.²⁶

²¹ Thomas Goodwin: *Of the Object and Acts of Justifying Faith in The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, Vol.8, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, p584.

²² Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Ninth Printing 1991; William F. Arndt and F.Wilbur Gingrich: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago... and The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, London, 1957.

²³ Henry Alford: *The New Testament for English Readers...*, Vol.1 Part 2, Rivingtons, London, 1863, p518.

²⁴ Of course, salvation, and all the things which accompany it – repentance, faith, and so on – are gifts and graces which only God can give and produce. This is not at issue.

²⁵ Alford p518.

²⁶ 'The work of God is to believe. Faith includes all the works which God requires' (M.R.Vincent: *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Macdonald Publishing Company, Florida, Vol.1 p441). Compare 'the work of the LORD' (Jer. 48:10), the work God requires, 'which is said with respect to the Chaldeans, who were enjoined to destroy the Moabites, which is called the work of the Lord, because he had given them a commission to do it; and which was to be done by them... This is a general rule... every man has work to do for God' (Gill: *Commentary*

Consider Christ himself. He did ‘the works of God’. What did this entail? Take the curing of the blind man. Yes, God was about to reveal his works in making the blind man see (John 9:3), but as Jesus immediately went on to say: ‘I must work the works of [God] while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work’ (John 9:4). Clearly, Christ was speaking of the work *he himself* would do. Yes, it was ‘the work of God’ in that it would be done by God’s power (John 14:10), and would please God; yet, in making the blind man see, whilst it was God’s work which Christ did, *it was Christ who did the work*. It was one of *his* works (John 15:24).

Christ’s curing the blind man is not an isolated example of the way he pleased his Father by his works. Christ’s entire life and death was a constant demonstration of it. Coming into the world, he set out his manifesto: ‘I have come... to do your will, O God’ (Heb. 10:5-7,9). Addressing his disciples, he elaborated the point: ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work’ (John 4:34). In other words, Christ was saying he delighted to obey God his Father, to carry out his commands, to complete the work, the duty, the Father had given him to do. In this way Christ was at work. ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working’ (John 5:17), he told the Jews. True, as he explained, ‘I can of myself do nothing’ (John 5:19,30), but even so his works were *his* own works; *he* did them. In all this, he could say, ‘I do not seek my own will but the will of the Father who sent me’ (John 5:30); in other words, I do my works in order to please the Father; indeed, ‘I always do those things that please him’ (John 8:29); ‘the works which the Father has given me to finish – the very works that I do – bear witness of me’ (John 5:36), ‘for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me’ (John 6:38). Of ‘the works that I do in my Father’s name’ (John 10:25), one – which he called ‘the will of the Father’ – was not to lose any who had been

Vol.4 p209). Compare also ‘[Christ’s] works’ (Rev. 2:26): ‘By his works are meant [here], not the works which were done by him... but the works which are commanded, and required by Christ to be done by his people... [such] as the work of faith... and every act of obedience’ (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p949).

given him by the Father (John 6:39); this work he did (John 17:12). Further, we hear him praying in the garden: ‘O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will’ (Matt. 26:39). It was just as he had said: ‘I have come... to do your will, O God’ (Heb. 10:5-7,9). And he completely fulfilled and accomplished all the work the Father had given him to do: ‘I have glorified you on the earth. I have finished the work which you have given me to do’ (John 17:4), ‘I have accomplished it’. We hear it loud and clear in his triumphant cry on the cross, ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30), ‘it is accomplished’.

In short, Christ did the works of God; that is, he did those works (John 14:31; 15:10) and said those words (John 12:49; 14:10,24) which God commanded him, which God required of him, and which pleased the Father (John 10:37). But it was Christ himself who did the works. While they were ‘the works of God’, they were *Christ’s own* works. Christ promised his disciples: ‘He who believes in me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do’ (John 14:12).

In John 6:28-29, therefore, the Jews were asking, as William Gurnall put it, about ‘that part of his will which above all he desires should be done – called therefore with emphasis “the work of God” (John 6:29)’.²⁷ And this is what Christ meant when he told them to believe. God requires you to believe, he told them. In short, Christ preached duty faith.

The principle is established: God requires sinners to believe; it is their duty; it is what pleases him. Not, it goes without saying, that sinners can believe by their own power: ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him’ (John 6:44), Christ declared. Even so, sinners are accountable for their unbelief:

Whoever believes in [Christ] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (John 3:18).

²⁷ William Gurnall: *Christian in Complete Armour*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Vol.2 pp49-50. The Jews said ‘works’ (*ta erga*). Jesus replied ‘work’ (*to ergon*).

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:36).

I [Jesus] will send [the Spirit] to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin... concerning sin, because they do not believe in me (John 16:7-9).

All this is part and parcel of ‘the obedience of faith’.

So what?

What does all this have to do with the believer and his progressive sanctification? I suggest there is a very close parallel. In fact, the principle comes over directly from the one to the other. God commands all men everywhere to repent and believe, to look to him for salvation (Isa. 45:22; Acts 17:30). Repentant faith, therefore, is every sinner’s duty. ‘Ah, but that’s for salvation, whereas we are talking about progressive sanctification’. So we are! We are talking about ‘the obedience of faith’. As I have shown, all men are obliged to give God ‘the obedience of faith’. The point is here, God’s commanding men does not cease when the sinner trusts Christ. God commands believers as well as unbelievers! Take just one example: ‘Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ (2 Pet. 3:18). Is that not a command? Is it not a command in Scripture? Is this not a part of the law of Christ? Is it not an aspect of ‘the obedience of faith’?

Conscious of what will be said by way of reply, let me stress yet again that just as the sinner cannot repent and believe without the operation of the Spirit (John 6:44), neither can the believer yield willing submission to Christ under his law except by the inward power and grace of the Spirit. As I have said, he can only live to God by walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). None of this is at issue. Nevertheless, the point still stands. God does not stop commanding once a man is converted. I have already quoted the apostle’s statement to Agrippa:

I... declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that

they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance (Acts 26:19-20).

But this obedience is only possible by the Spirit. As the apostle put it:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).²⁸

The letter to the Hebrews is the book of all books setting out the glories of the new covenant. In approaching his conclusion, its writer left his readers with a clear exposition of the principle:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20-21).

It is as the prophet had foretold:

I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God (Ezek. 11:19-20).²⁹

²⁸ The point is beautifully illustrated in this: ‘By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed’ (1 Cor. 15:10-11). Paul worked. He worked hard. He preached with saving result. But it wasn’t he – it was God. It wasn’t flesh – it was grace. But, even so, he worked, and worked hard. See Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 12:6.

²⁹ Calvin commented: ‘God does not wish us to be like stones. Let us strive therefore and stretch all our nerves, and do our utmost towards acting uprightly. But Paul advises that to be done with fear and trembling; that is, by casting away all confidence in one’s own strength... Paul gives the reason, because, says he, it is God who works both to will and to accomplish (Phil. 2:13)’.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:25-27).

Just as the sinner is obligated to repent and believe, so the believer is obligated to obey scriptural commands and live worthy of his calling. The believer's duty to obey God is no less a duty and obligation than the unbeliever's. If he fails, he sins.³⁰ As Matthew 5 – 7 and John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33 make clear, Christ is his people's lawgiver. And as for post-Pentecost Scriptures, are they not full of apostolic commands calling for the believer's obedience? And not only direct commands. The apostles set out a host of principles which believers are duty-bound to apply in their daily lives. And do not forget Christ's addresses to the churches (Revelation 1 – 3). Look how that book begins:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it (Rev. 1:1-3).

Too many treat prophecy as mere advance information, when the fact is Christ issues his word, all his word, for us to apply to our lives as principles and commands which we have to obey. And there is nothing passive about it.

Nor is it just isolated verses. The overall picture of the believer's progressive sanctification throughout the New Testament is as far removed from the passive as it is possible to

³⁰ As I have already noted, there is a difference between the unbeliever and the believer. Unbelief (that is, not obeying the gospel) for the sinner is condemning (John 3:18,36; 16:7-9); for the saint it is reward-losing (1 Cor. 3:8,14-15; 4:5).

get. Thus, believers – who are God’s ‘workmanship’ – produce ‘good works, which God prepared beforehand’. But, I emphasise, it is the believers themselves who do the good works. God doesn’t. ‘We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that *we* should walk in them’ (Eph. 2:10). Of course, believers can only do those works by God’s grace, by the Spirit’s power, but the point stands; believers do the works, believer have to do the works, it is their duty, they are obliged to obey God’s commands, and they are accountable to Christ if they do not. And they discover God’s commands in Scripture.³¹

In short, the idea that the believer is not under the law of Christ, and that the Scriptures are not an integral part of that law, and that the believer is anything less than fully active in determined obedience to the revealed will of God written in Scripture, is wide of the mark.

Yes, the believer has a renewed will, having been regenerated by the Spirit, and, yes, the Spirit moves him to obedience. But

³¹ Compare this Facebook post from an advocate of the system I am contesting: ‘We are not dependent upon law prescriptions to produce in us what only the Spirit can effect through his word. We don’t learn to love others (the chief fulfilment of the law [of Moses] and fruit of the Spirit) by reading/obeying written detailed “how to” prescriptions (laws). We learn what love looks like and acts like by reading of Christ, the incarnate fulfilment, his tenderness toward sinners, his tireless ministry of mercy and good works, his love for the Father, and the grand display of their triune love for the world through the cross. In this way, we see that love is shaped like a person. It is the gospel of Jesus-Christ-shaped, grace-empowered, self-sacrificing, redeeming, merciful, sin-cancelling, and cross-centric. This love is informed in [to?] our minds as we saturate ourselves in him through the written word. But it is not empowered in our volition [will, decision, deliberate choice, resolve] by prescriptive law(s) that binds us “to do” upon pain of death. Rather, God’s love is empowered in us by the Spirit, in conformance with the gospel pattern of Christ. He gives us a living will/volition and ability to love with Christ’s own love’. While there is much to applaud in this (without the Spirit, no amount of Scripture will produce godliness, and so on), notice the lack of emphasis on the believer’s deliberate obedience to the law of Christ as found in apostolic commands in Scripture; indeed, notice the stress the other way!

this obedience is not passive, some kind of reflex reaction to the Spirit. As the sinner has to obey the gospel, so does the saint. The Spirit does not obey gospel commands for the believer any more than he repents and believes for the sinner, although he is the ultimate cause of all gospel obedience. While the Spirit is the prime mover of all faith and obedience, nevertheless both the sinner and the saint must deliberately obey God's commands. It is their duty to obey. And they are answerable to God if they do not. Accommodating the words of the apostle (Rom. 3:27), we would not go far wrong to call this 'the law of the gospel'. Sticking to Scripture, it is 'the obedience of faith'.