

Obeying the Truth

Galatians 3: 1

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In the Old Testament, obedience necessarily has a very prominent place. The law of Moses had been presented to Israel as the basis of their relationship with God, and obedience was what it demanded. Life was conditioned upon obedience since the word was, "This do, and thou shalt live." The New Testament records the introduction of grace and truth by Jesus Christ, and the establishment of a new order of things on that basis.

This does not, however, mean that obedience is superseded as being no longer necessary: we find, on the contrary, that obedience is prominent just as before. What it does mean is that obedience changes its character. Legal obedience is one thing; the obedience which grace enjoins and produces is quite another. The former means the carrying out of the obligation imposed in order that one might thereby live and continue in the favour of God. The latter means a deliverance effected by God, a new relationship established, a new nature produced, with obedience as the happy fruit of this; and that obedience, not as of a servant with a master merely, but as a son with a father, taking its character from the obedience of Christ. We are "Elect . . . unto the obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1: 2), that is, to obey as Christ obeyed.

Obedience lies right at the beginning of the Christian's history. He believes the Gospel; but faith, if it is real, eventuates in obedience, and hence Scripture also speaks of obeying the Gospel. The Apostle Paul tells us he "received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His Name" (Rom. 1: 5); and in the Acts we read of those who were "obedient to the faith" (Acts 6: 7). "The faith" is that whole body of truth which has been revealed in connection with the Lord Jesus Christ, but which has not yet been established in any visible or public way. It is "the truth," but inasmuch as at present it can only be apprehended by faith it is "the faith." That faith is now being heralded among the nations, and from amongst them a people for His Name is being gathered out; they are manifested by yielding the obedience of faith to "the faith" when they hear it.

The Gospel is, of course, the foundation. The Epistle to the Romans does not, however, close without a mention of that which was, in Paul's ministry, the top-stone. He desired that the saints should be established not only "according to my Gospel" but also "according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16: 25, 26). Thus, whether it be the foundation or the top-stone of that which the Apostle Paul was called to minister, all was presented to faith, and further, all that was so presented to, and received by, faith was to be expressed in obedience.

In the Epistle to the Galatians, the apostle twice uses an expression which we must note. He says: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not *obey the truth*?" (Gal. 3: 1); and again, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not *obey the truth*?" (Gal. 5: 7). In the former passage the words "that ye should not obey the truth" are by many omitted as lacking in authority, but there is no question about the latter passage. Evidently, then, truth is made known to us not merely: that we may be sure as to what is reality and be able to distinguish it for our own soul's good from what is merely outward appearance and vain show, but also that the realities which the truth

presents may govern our lives in actual present practice, that we may give some actual expression to those realities while as yet the world is imposed upon by unrealities.

Have we given sufficient weight to this? We venture to say that there are not a few Christians who are quite aware that in the New Testament, as in the Old, there are many plain injunctions and commands, many clearly formulated statements of the will of God for His saints, disobedience to which can only involve them in spiritual loss and confusion, who yet hardly recognize that all the truth revealed in the New Testament, whether it concerns the individual saint, his privileges and the relationships in which he is set, or whether the church of God as a corporate body, makes its demand upon their obedience. It makes its demand indeed upon each saint individually in either case, for in the latter each saint is an integral part of the church, a stone in the building, a member of Christ's body, and no amount of failure or break-up in the visible body of Christians absolves the individual member of the body from walking in obedience to the whole truth that concerns the church.

Turn again, however, to the two passages in Galatians and observe more particularly the context of the former. This may help us to see more clearly just what the apostle meant in that instance by obeying the truth. The outburst, "O foolish Galatians," sprang from the depth of his love and concern on their behalf, but it was prompted by the inspired recapitulation of the truth of the Cross of Christ in its practical bearings, which he had just penned.

In Galatians 2: 11-21, we are given a little bit of history concerning Peter's visit to Antioch. Owing to the fear of man, in the persons of certain brethren of strong Jewish tendencies from Jerusalem, Peter withdrew and separated himself from the Gentile believers. This was "not according to the truth of the Gospel" and hence was strongly resisted by Paul.

The uninstructed onlookers of those days might have asked with a measure of surprise, "What has the Gospel got to do with such a question as whether or no Jewish believers should eat with Gentile believers?" It had, indeed, everything to do with it, as Paul proceeded to show with unanswerable logic. He simply expounded afresh, step by step, what the truth of the Gospel really is.

Let us formulate a few items of that truth which lie on the surface of this Scripture:-

1. Whether "Jews by nature" or "sinners of the Gentiles," none of us has any standing before God on the ground of "the works of the law," that is to say, we all alike are sinners, coming short of God's glory. There is really no difference.
2. Whether Jew or Gentile, having believed in Jesus Christ, we are justified by the faith of Christ.
3. That justification has a righteous basis inasmuch as the believing sinner' be he Jew or Gentile, has died — "crucified with Christ."
4. He has died under the law's sentence, but as dying "through the law," he has died "to the law" — i.e., from under the whole legal system — that he might "live unto God."
5. He lives to God not in the life of the first Adam but in the life of Christ, which is so really his that Christ lives in him and shines before his soul as the object of his faith.

Here, then, we have "the truth of the Gospel" to which Paul alludes in Galatians 2: 5. It was that which had cost him much conflict. It led to his journey to Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 15, that he might boldly face the men whose teachings imperilled it, as also it led to his conflict with Peter at Antioch as recorded here. The truth of the Gospel is that man, whether Jew or Gentile, has no righteous standing before God, is in fact totally condemned; and that the Cross of Christ is the definite legal execution of that condemnation and the bearing of the curse which the law had pronounced; and that

the believer, now cleared by death from the condemnation and from the law system which pronounced it, lives in the life of the risen Christ unto God, controlled and governed now, not by the demands and regulations of the law, but by "the faith of the Son of God," i.e., the Son of God made a living, bright reality to the soul by faith. Of this new life, love is the motive force, the compelling power, for the Son of God, it says. "loved me, and gave Himself for me."

With this truth of the Gospel, Peter at Antioch was plainly inconsistent. He does not appear to have at all denied it in his teaching. Theoretically he admitted its truth, but his action in withdrawing from the Gentile believers, and no longer eating with them, was disobedience to the truth. It practically erected again the "middle wall of partition" which the Cross had demolished; it inferred that believing Jews still lived in the life of Judaism, and believing Gentiles in the life of Gentiledom, instead of both now being in the life of Christ.

Peter's deviation from the truth of the Gospel in this practical way might seem on the surface to be but a small thing; it had nevertheless a very serious side, and this the Apostle Paul makes manifest in the last verse of the chapter. Having defined his own position which was in strict accord with the truth of the Gospel, he said: "I do not frustrate the grace of God." The emphasis is evidently to be laid on the "I" — "It is not I who am frustrating the grace of God" — the inference being that it was Peter and those influenced by him who were committing themselves to this sorry work. The grace of God had brought both Jews and Gentiles together in this new and exalted privilege and they were frustrating this in practice by separating them! Moreover, they were in principle going back to law, and if one goes back to it *at all*, one goes back to it *for all*; and to go back to it for righteousness means that Christ has died "in vain" or "for nothing."

"Christ has died for nothing" (N. Tr.). His toil, His sorrows, His death under judgment, as a sacrifice for sin, all for nothing, inasmuch as after all righteousness can come by the law. God takes a most toilsome and expensive way to accomplish a certain result, and lo! *man* can achieve the same result in a much simpler way. Then the death of Christ is simply a tragic blunder!

What a fearful conclusion to reach! But Paul is simply carrying the meaning of Peter's action to its logical end. No wonder he turns to the Galatians with such an appeal. Jesus Christ crucified, had been most evidently set forth, as before their very eyes, and here were they too, disobeying the truth; accepting the truth of the Cross in theory, and denying it in practice.

The Galatian error is not extinct: rather it flourishes exceedingly. We need not be of those who boast the Cross and lift it high as a symbol in their services, and wear it upon their persons, while maintaining as a principle a Jewish order of things and alliance with the world, to be involved in this error. It creeps in far more subtly. Easier still is it to be inconsistent in practice with the truth of the Cross even though avoiding the exact form of inconsistency seen in the Galatians. How easy to maintain theologically the Cross as the moral judgment of men after the flesh, and of man's world, and yet in practice to allow and foster in large measure both one and the other!

But we have referred to this passage in Galatians 2 and Galatians 3 firstly to establish the principle that *truth*, *all* truth, demands *obedience*, just as surely as definitely formulated commandments or instructions do; and secondly, to illustrate *how* obedience is yielded to the truth of God, *the way* in which it can be rendered. Once let us grasp these two things and we shall see how all that which is presented to us in Scripture as truth in the abstract, is to be obeyed, by being translated into concrete form and shape in the lives of Christians, whether individually or collectively.

As to what is individual in its nature, no great difficulty exists. The path of obedience is comparatively simple. All that hinders us is lack of exercise as to what is the will of the Lord as

revealed in Scripture, and lack of that spirit of devotion and love and simple-hearted subjection which sets aside our own wills in favour of the will of the Lord.

That which concerns us collectively as belonging to the church of God, as members of the body of Christ, is not so simple, inasmuch as here we are each but a part of a whole, and that whole, viewed as a public body, is in a state of failure and consequent ruin, shattered externally into hundreds of fragments. As a result a very complicated situation exists. The truth as to the church of God in its corporate capacity as revealed in Scripture shines as clearly as it did in the first century when the Pauline epistles were written; but the present state of affairs in the midst of which we Christians of today are responsible to act in obedience to that truth as found in Scripture renders much prayerful exercise upon our part necessary, lest we fail in its application; lest in translating one part of the truth into practice we miss by reason of modern complications the proper translation of another part of the truth which is of equal importance.

Many of our readers, we fear, have given but little consideration, if any, to this side of things. Some have never yet sat down, Bible in hand, to discover what is the truth as to the church of God, its calling, character, privileges, responsibilities, and destiny.

Others, again, may have some idea of these things, but they relegate what they know to an impractical region, a region of pure theory as far as the present is concerned, by speaking of the "invisible church," the "mystical body." The Scriptural truth of the church is to them of this mystical and invisible order, to be turned to account doubtless in the coming age, but of no practical use today. Hence no question of obedience to it arises in their minds. They keep it, so to speak, pigeon-holed in one compartment of their minds whilst many other compartments are occupied with the details of the troubles and struggles occasioned by the broken and unscriptural disorder of the so-called "churches," and the rapid progress of the apostasy in their systems. With all the evil and drift and apostasy they perhaps manfully struggle, doing their best to stem the tide and maintain the truths of the Gospel.

We rejoice in every faithful effort on behalf of the truth and heartily give thanks unto God. Yet should we ourselves be lacking in faithfulness to the light of the Word of God, if we did not point out once again that contending against error and evil is at best but negative, and that what is far more potent and specially approved of God is obedience to His Word. Today, as ever, in the confusion which marks the church, simple obedience to the truth concerning the church as unfolded in Scripture, is what will please Him. It is more really efficacious in its practical results than the performing of great exploits could ever be, especially if those exploits are in any way divorced from the knowledge of and obedience to the Word.

As to all this we can adopt the words of the wise in Proverbs 4: 24, 25, and say: "Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee" — at the truth of God as we have it in Scripture. Then, "Ponder the path of thy feet" — that it may be in accordance with that truth — "and let all thy ways be established."