

OBEDIENCE-BASED DISCIPLESHIP

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Obedience based discipleship is a significant feature in contemporary missionary practice. Simply put, obedience based discipleship stresses the importance of teaching people to obey the Bible, rather than simply teaching people Bible content. Proponents of this approach see themselves as correcting a tendency in evangelical ministry toward knowledge based discipleship, in which people are taught the content of the Bible, evangelical theology, and perhaps apologetics, but are not taught a life of obedience to the commands of Christ. These advocates of obedience based discipleship contend that any other approach both disobeys Scripture and impedes the advance of the gospel. How did this approach develop, and how should these claims be assessed?

The command of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 is a command to make disciples. This is reflected clearly in all modern English translations of the Bible. The King James Version, however, says “Go ye therefore and teach all nations,” and as this version of the Bible dominated the thinking of the English speaking Christian world for over three and a half centuries (including the beginning of the modern missionary movement), this translational choice heavily influenced evangelical ministry and missiology up until the last few decades.

Growing up in Southern Baptist churches in the middle of the 20th century, no one talked about discipleship until the 1970s. Prior to that, churches held Sunday School on Sunday mornings and Training Union on Sunday nights, but both operated on information-based educational models. Moral expectations were conveyed by family upbringing and societal norms, and religious expectations were indicated by the boxes to be marked on one’s offering envelop. Clearly, what it meant to be a good Christian was to be present in Sunday School, to bring your

Bible to church with you, to read your Bible daily, to give money as an offering, and to go from Sunday School to the worship service. If you were a more serious Christian, you attended Training Union and evening service on Sunday nights, and REALLY serious Christians went to Wednesday night prayer meeting as well. Obviously, many believers developed deep relationships with Christ and lived godly lives within this system. However, no one called it discipleship, and information transfer was the primary model of Christian education.

In the parachurch world, meanwhile, discipleship as an explicit element in Christian ministry was being developed. Groups like Intersarsity Christian Fellowship and the Navigators stressed the need to accompany Bible teaching with training in the spiritual disciplines. In the famous Wheel Diagram of the Navigators, the balanced Christian life was centered on Christ as the hub of the wheel, and the spokes consisted of Bible study, prayer, fellowship with other Christians, and evangelism. Intersarsity enumerated its key emphases as evangelism, discipleship and missions. In these and other parachurch ministries, normal Christian believers were expected to be able to study the Bible on their own and in small groups, to have a daily devotional time of Bible study and prayer, to memorize Scripture, to know how to share the gospel with an unbeliever (and actually to evangelize), and to meet regularly with other believers for worship, encouragement, and fellowship. This model of discipleship combined acquiring biblical knowledge with developing and using skills like inductive Bible study, Scripture memory, and evangelism. Some form of Christian fellowship was expected, but there was limited emphasis on the role of the local church.

Over time, discipleship programs found their way into the institutional church. Some were specialized in one area of the Christian life, such as *Evangelism Explosion*, which was pioneered by D. James Kennedy at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Others were broader in scope, like *MasterLife* (originally developed by Avery Willis on the mission field in the 1970s in Indonesia), which was introduced to North American churches in the 1980s. Meanwhile, however, pastoral training continued to be an academic undertaking. While it is true that classical theological education has long included skills training in preaching,

pastoral counseling and Christian education, the bulk of the curriculum continued to involve classroom teaching of an entirely cognitive nature. The educational system of the Western world and the traditions of Christian education in churches and academic theological training in seminaries all worked together to create a model of Christian growth that was heavily weighted on the cognitive dimension.

An early example of obedience-based discipleship comes from the work of George Patterson and Richard Scroggins. In their well-known book, *Church Multiplication Guide*,¹ Patterson and Scroggins issue a passionate appeal for discipleship focused on obedience to the commands of Christ. Early in the book, they state, “The most important thing to multiply churches is to obey our Lord Jesus Christ in childlike faith and love.”² The commands they have in mind are explicitly commands they find in the Gospels coming from the lips of Jesus, and they enumerate them as follows: repent, believe, and receive the Holy Spirit, be baptized, love, break bread, pray, give, and make disciples.³ Over a third of the book is devoted to explicating these commands.

There are two features about this emphasis on obedience as the basis of discipleship that need to be noted. First, they privilege the commands of Jesus over the rest of the New Testament. “We also obey Jesus when we observe His apostles’ commands. They spoke and wrote with the inspired authority of Christ. The commands in their letters, however, are not *basic*. They are not the foundation or ‘basement floor’ of the building; they belong to the second story and on up, for leaders and believers already baptized and under a church’s care.”⁴ This assertion of a canon within the canon has been suggested by others as well,⁵ but it is controversial at best, and many will find it problematic. However, it is not essential to the concept of obedience-based discipleship, and others who share this methodology do not share this prioritization of the actual

¹George Patterson and Richard Scroggins, *Church Multiplication Guide* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002).

² *Ibid.*, 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ *Ibid.* (emphasis original).

⁵ See, for example, Jonathan Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), chapter 12, “The Gospels and the Archway of the Canon.”

words of Jesus over the writings of the apostles. Second, Patterson and Scroggins stress obedience alongside and even above theological knowledge. “A heavy emphasis on doctrinal teaching as the initial foundation, without the corresponding application of loving obedience, reflects the crippling rationalism and individualism of the West of the 20th century, not Kingdom theology. *Nothing* takes precedence for a new believer over loving, faithful, childlike obedience to our loving Lord.”⁶ They go on to warn, “We endanger the spiritual life of a newborn babe in Christ if we force upon him the ‘heavy meat’ of detailed Bible doctrines *before* he learns basic obedience in love. That invites pride.”⁷

In discussing leadership training, Patterson and Scroggins carefully note that they approve of formal academic education.⁸ However, given Patterson’s involvement in the development of Theological Education by Extension in Honduras, it is not surprising that they emphasize non-traditional modes of pastoral training, and even here, they sound their characteristic note:

If we teach heavy Bible doctrine before one has learned simple, loving, childlike obedience we jeopardize his commitment to Christ... We try to avoid the paralysis that arises from teaching heavy Bible doctrine to potential leaders before they can apply it and learn to live in simple, loving, childlike obedience.⁹

The foci are clear. Bible doctrine is “heavy,” and it can be dangerous. “Simple, loving, childlike obedience” is the goal of both discipleship and leadership training.

Obedience-based discipleship as the key to church multiplication is now widely popular among evangelical missionaries in general and among workers of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board (IMB) in particular. It constitutes one of the foundational pieces of “Training for Trainers” (T4T), a comprehensive method for evangelism, discipleship, church multiplication and leadership training widely used by IMB workers. The method was developed by Ying Kai and Steve Smith in East Asia, but is now in use world-wide. The two men

⁶ Patterson and Scroggins, 25 (emphasis original).

⁷ Ibid., 26 (emphasis original).

⁸ Ibid., 226.

⁹ Ibid., 224.

articulated their approach in *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution*,¹⁰ in an attempt to ground the method in its larger philosophy and to emphasize the process in which the individual components of the method should be utilized. From the start, the authors are quite clear that obedience-based discipleship lies at the heart of their method. “Obedience is the mark of true discipleship. Obedient disciples are not those who give verbal assent only, but actually obey what the Father commands...T4T is built on an obedience-based discipleship model. Disciples move on as they obey each lesson from Scripture.”¹¹

Like Patterson and Scroggins, Steve Smith and Ying Kai draw an explicit contrast between obedience-based and knowledge-based discipleship. In a section labeled “Obedience-based versus Knowledge-based Maturity,” they write, “In some Christian ministry, we assess how mature a believer is based on *how much he knows*. But the New Testament assesses the maturity of a believer based on *how much he obeys* (e.g. John 14:15; James 1:22-25).”¹²

This emphasis on obedience, with a concomitant commitment to accountability, continues throughout the book and permeates every aspect of the T4T method. The acquisition of knowledge is subordinated to the exercise of obedience. Even in leadership training,¹³ the emphasis is on obedience and not theological acumen or academic education. In the classical educational triad of “Be – Know – Do,” obedience-based discipleship prioritizes “Do” as the highest value.

How should obedience-based discipleship be assessed? The first thing that must be said is that, from a biblical point of view, obedience is an essential, non-negotiable component of discipleship. Jesus made this clear. In the Sermon on the Mount he taught, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 7:21). Jesus taught that loving God was the first and greatest commandment (Mark 12:28–31), and he connected love and obedience by saying, “If you love

¹⁰ Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (Monument: WIGTake Resources, 2011).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, 79 (emphasis original).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 259–281.

me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). When Jesus gave the command to make disciples of all people groups in the Great Commission, he explained discipleship explicitly in terms of teaching obedience to everything he had commanded (Matt 28:18–20). Luke connects obedience to Christian conversion when he reports that “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

Paul, the great champion of justification by faith apart from works of the law, connects obedience and faith as inseparable phenomena in the introduction to his letter to the Romans, “We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,” Rom 1:5, and he like Luke connects obedience and conversion later in the same letter: “For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience” (Rom 15:18). He vehemently denies that the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone should lead to a life of disobedience (Rom 6–8), but rather expects the gospel to result in a life of growing holiness. He furthermore expects his readers to obey what he has taught them in the past and what he writes in his letters (Gal 5:7, Phil 2:12, 2 Thess 3:14). James (James 1:22–25, 2:14–26) and Peter (1 Pet 1:1–2) likewise expect obedience as a normal part of the life of Christian believers. John goes so far as to link assurance of salvation with obedience to God (1 John 2:3–6, 3:4–10). Discipleship which is not characterized by a life of obedience is not biblical discipleship at all.

However, it is one thing to say that biblical discipleship should issue in obedience, and another thing altogether to make obedience the basis of discipleship. It is also one thing to say that knowledge without obedience is dangerous, and another thing to set obedience above knowledge or at odds with it. This was certainly not the pattern of the apostles.

The letters of the New Testament were part of the apostolic missionary method. They were written to the common, ordinary members of churches planted by the apostles (as with Corinth or Philippi), or by those trained by the apostles (as with Colossae), or by unknown, nameless believers (as with Rome, or the churches in Asia Minor addressed by Peter). Many of

these churches had only been started recently, and many of the recipients of these letters were recent converts (many of whom were probably non-literate, oral learners).

Three things may be observed from the apostolic letters of the New Testament. First, theological knowledge was given as the basis for practical obedience. It is particularly true in the letters of Paul that he often begins with an extended discourse on gospel theology, and then transitions with the word “therefore” into the practical sections of his letters.¹⁴ Clearly, the truth about God and his gospel is the essential foundation for Christian obedience. Paul does not simply issue orders to be obeyed. He explains the theological truth that motivates and enables obedience before he exhorts people to that obedience. This is a crucial difference between legalism and Christian discipleship. The biblical pattern puts knowing (the message of the gospel, and the larger biblical theology that stands behind it and around it) and being (being a new creation in Christ, in union with him and indwelt by his Holy Spirit) as the necessary foundations for doing, not as secondary or extraneous to it.

Second, the apostolic letters of the New Testament present deep theology to ordinary Christians, many of whom were recent converts. The book of Romans was not written to graduate students, or even to church leaders alone. Paul clearly thought that the content of Romans was important for ordinary believers and even new converts to understand. There is no such thing as burdening young Christians with heavy Bible doctrine. To regard the great theological themes of the Bible as unnecessary for new believers is to disregard what the Holy Spirit, through the apostles, thought essential for the new believers of the early church. It is true that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1 Cor 8:1). However, in context, the “knowledge” against which Paul warns the Corinthians in this passage is not actual knowledge of Scripture or of Scriptural theology, but rather a form of speculative knowledge not grounded in Scripture. Scriptural theology, taught as Paul taught it, results in humility, worship, and love. It also results

¹⁴ See, for example, Rom 12:1, Eph 4:1, Col 2:16.

in a life of obedience. It is unbiblical to withhold the full counsel of God (Acts 20:27) from believers of any age, or to regard the doctrines of the Bible as an unnecessary burden.

Third, the vast majority of the obedience enjoined by the New Testament is altogether mundane in nature. There is actually very little about evangelism and church planting, and a great deal about ordinary life. From the commands given in the New Testament, it is clear that God cares a great deal that we love one another and our neighbor, that our speech be honest and encouraging, that we relate in a loving, honorable, respectful way with family members, bosses, employees, and the government, that we work hard and well, that we handle our money as honest stewards, and that we maintain the unity of the body of Christ. Everyone is to be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them, but not everyone is called or gifted to be a church planter, a teacher, or a church leader. Based on who God is and what he has done for us in Christ, discipleship must lay the same emphases as the New Testament on godly living in every area of life. All are called to witness, and some are called to start new churches or even take the gospel where it has never been, but the overwhelming focus of the applicational sections of the New Testament is on the ordinary life of the ordinary believer.

The connection between knowledge and obedience is clearly made in Romans 12:1–2. Paul begins his appeal with the word “therefore,” pointing back to what comes before in his letter. The immediate context is his discussion of Israel, salvation, and the church, concluding with a doxology based on the wisdom and knowledge of God. The larger context is his entire discourse on the gospel from the beginning of the letter to this point, and the further reference in Romans 12:1 to “the mercies of God” makes it likely that this was what Paul had in mind. The mercies of God as explicated in all of the “heavy Bible doctrine” of Romans 1–11 are the foundation for the life of consecrated obedience as described in the rest of this letter.

The connection between obedience and the life of the mind is made even more explicit in the following verse. Paul commands his readers to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” in opposition to being conformed to this world, and he makes that the condition for being able to test and discern the will of God. As you think, so you live. Sin affects the way people

think, and makes it impossible for them to understand the things of God (Rom 3:11, 1 Cor 2:14, 2 Cor 4:4). Part of the ministry of Paul involved destroying arguments and taking thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:5). The practical application section of the letter to the Romans is summarized by his appeal for believers to offer their lives as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. This life of complete and active consecration is then spelled out in all that follows. The foundation for such a life is found in the theology of the first 11 chapters of the book, and the necessary instrument for conducting such a life is a renewed mind that sees reality God's way, according to God's word, and is no longer conformed to this world. Obedience is unquestionably essential. However, such obedience requires a transformed life, made alive by the Spirit, and a transformed mind, saturated with the truth of God's word.

So what should we think of obedience-based discipleship? First of all, biblical discipleship should most certainly teach and expect obedience. Information-based discipleship which expects no change in behavior and no activity in the advance of the gospel is not really discipleship at all. However, obedience is not the basis for discipleship, nor does it stand alone as the main aspect of discipleship. The basis of discipleship is the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ, which itself necessarily includes the full teaching of the Bible in all of its doctrinal categories. Discipleship therefore has a theological foundation, and this foundation must be in play at every step of the way to keep discipleship from becoming a form of legal obedience. The next logical element of discipleship is a transformation in being. You cannot be a disciple unless you have been born again, united to Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That transformation of being also must be in play at every step of discipleship, as gospel obedience is impossible without it.

Biblical discipleship therefore involves knowing, being and doing in an inseparable union. All must equally be stressed. To leave any out, or to stress any above the others, is to inflict serious damage on the whole. Any form of obedience-based discipleship which downplays the crucial importance of Scriptural theology, or the importance of union with Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, is sub-biblical. To keep discipleship from becoming a Christianized

form of legalism (a Christian *Shariah* or *Talmud*, perhaps), it is better to think of Gospel-based discipleship leading to Gospel-based obedience.