

B. Law and Obedience in Christ

Christians generally acknowledge Jesus' obedience as the basis for their own, but this means different things to different people. For some, Jesus provided the *example* for Christians to follow ("What would Jesus do?") while others see His obedient life as the proper *motivation* for theirs. Others take it a step further, arguing that Jesus' obedience results in Christians having the *power* to fulfill God's law as He did. There is an essential relationship between Jesus' obedience and that of His followers and each of the above views brings something to the table. But there is a fundamental dimension to this relationship that must be the starting point in any consideration of Christian obedience and obligation to God's law (however "law" may be defined and understood). That is the issue of what it means to be a Christian; *a person's relation to Jesus' obedience is determined by his relation to Jesus Himself.*

The New Testament defines the relationship between Jesus and His followers in terms of *participation*: The Christian is "*in Christ*," and this union is both ontological (involving the person's being) and spiritual (in and through the Spirit). While many view the relationship between Christ and His people as *legal* and *positional* (having a legal standing before God because of Jesus' atoning work), it is far more intimate than that. It involves the union of their persons with His person through the renewing and transforming power of the Spirit. Christians are "in Christ" in the sense that they share in Jesus' own life by the indwelling of His Spirit who subsequently works to transform them "into the same likeness from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). They are rendered "new men" by sharing in the resurrection life of the True Man – the Last Adam who is the beginning and fountainhead of God's new and consummate human community (cf. John 6:53-58, 14:16-19 with 1 Corinthians 15:35-49; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:1-22, 4:20-24; Colossians 3:1-11).

1. Taking the above observations together with the fact that obedience to "law" involves conformity to the truth which Torah discloses, it becomes evident that Christian obedience is conformity to the truth *as it is in Christ* (ref. again Ephesians 4:20-24). For all Torah – including what is regarded as "law" – has its ultimate meaning and fulfillment in Jesus. So also He fulfilled Torah, not by keeping commandments as such, but by embodying in Himself and His life all that Torah revealed, promised and prescribed; Jesus fulfilled Torah by being *True God, True Man, True Israel, and True Covenant*.
 - a. Thus obedience to Torah ("law") is conformity to Christ as He embodies Torah, *but conformity grounded in sharing in His life*. This sort of conformity doesn't involve mere compliance or imitation, but living out one's new life which is Jesus' life (Galatians 2:20). Christ's people follow His example as sharers in Him.
 - b. In this way, Christian obedience (conformity to Christ) is conformity to *one's true self*. Torah defines the truth of man – i.e., authentic humanness – and identifies that truth as existing in the True Man, Jesus the Messiah. So Torah obligates human beings to the truth of authentic human existence, but this demand can only be met by sharing in the humanness of the truly human One. People become truly human by sharing in Jesus' humanness; thus Torah's "righteousness" is fulfilled *in those animated and led by the Spirit* (Romans 8:4; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14-21).

2. The starting point, then, is to recognize that “obedience to law” is conformity to God’s Torah as it is embodied and fulfilled in Jesus. This conformity presupposes sharing in Jesus’ life, *so that true human obedience has union with Christ as its first demand and foundational principle*. Thus Jesus spoke of the need for all people, Jew and Gentile alike, to derive life from Him (John 3:1-6, 6:32-33, 48-58), while Paul expressed this universal human obligation in terms of “God declaring to all men everywhere that they should repent” (Acts 17:30). This repentance involves a change of mind – not regarding behavior or lifestyle choices, but what it means to be human. God calls all people to find the truth of humanness in His incarnate Son and so find in Him the truth of themselves and thus the “righteousness” of an authentic human life. To “repent and believe” in Jesus, then, involves discerning and rejecting the falseness of pseudo-human existence (which all people live as children of Adam, regardless of their lifestyle or ethics) and embracing the true humanness that exists in Jesus and is obtained by sharing in His life.
 - a. And so genuine obedience begins with seeking and finding life in Jesus; this is the obligation of knowing Him and being found in Him (Philippians 3:1-9). All subsequent obedience – that is, the ongoing Christian obligation of obedience – is simply the authentic and faithful living out of one’s participation in Christ. Paul referred to this as “*putting on Christ*” (Romans 13:14) or “*putting on the new man*” (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:1-11) and he highlighted the critical role of the Holy Spirit in this with such phrases as “*walking in the Spirit*,” “*grieving the Spirit*” and “*quenching the Spirit*” (ref. Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:16, 25; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19).

*The obedient Christian life, then, isn’t compliance with a set of commandments or an ethical code, but the life of **christiformity**: discerning and yielding to the Spirit’s mind and His work of perfecting Christ’s life in His people. Obedience is living out the truth of “I in you and you in Me.”* (cf. John 14:18ff, 17:20-23; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Romans 7:1-6, 8:1-24, 12:1-15:13; Galatians 5:16-25; etc.).
 - b. And this discernment and submission result from the Christian disciplines of prayer, study, meditation, worship and fellowship. These disciplines constitute the *life of faith* – faith put into practice. So they are also the foundation for the obedience that is conformity to Christ, thus illumining the meaning of Paul’s expression, “*the obedience of faith*” (Romans 1:1-5, 16:25-26). The obedient response of faith that initiates life in Christ also sustains and nurtures that life.
3. And so the essence of Christian obedience is the obligation of *christiformity*. God commands all people to conform to the truth of Torah, and this means embracing and living out the truth of authentic humanness as it exists in the True Man, Jesus the Messiah. This “law,” then, is just as binding on the Christian as the unbeliever:
 - a. For the *unbeliever*, God’s Torah calls him to come to Christ and be saved (Acts 2:1-41; 1 Timothy 2:1-6). But again, this call concerns the human obligation of *authenticity* – the righteous obligation of all human beings to be what God created them to be and so fulfill their identity and function as image-children.

- b. For the *Christian*, obedience is usually treated as submission to a moral/ethical standard which God demands of every human being. In this scheme, “salvation” is a legal transaction which gives a person a new status before God. In turn, the “repentance” associated with this salvation amounts to turning away from previous sinful practices to conform to God’s standard. But missing in all of this is the fundamental truth that salvation involves the union of the person with the person of God in Christ by the Spirit. *Again, obedience is more than a new manner of living one’s life; it is conforming to the life of the new self in Christ.*

This understanding explains why obedience is crucial to the Christian life. Even more, it explains the sense in which Christians are obligated to God’s “law”: Law is *Torah* and Torah defines and prescribes human “righteousness” as the authentic humanness which exists only in the resurrected Messiah. Thus all people are obligated to fulfill this “law,” and they do so by becoming truly human in Christ. This “obedience” begins with embracing Jesus in faith so as to be found in Him and it continues with the faithfulness of living in Him (Colossians 2:6-3:4).

The Church has grappled throughout its history with the issues of repentance, obedience, righteousness, law and grace, justification and sanctification, etc. But conspicuously missing in much of its considerations has been a clear understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The Church’s thinking began evolving very early on and, by the fourth century, being a Christian meant embracing the Christian “religion” through sacramental initiation and submission to its dictates. “Christian” became the label attached to members of *Christendom* – the earthly Christian kingdom that became the Holy Roman Empire. This way of defining Christian identity continued until the Reformation and the move to a closer tie with the Scriptures. But even then the issue of what it means to be a Christian was left muddled by the insistence on preserving the existing definition of the Church; the Reformers largely clung to the tradition of defining a Christian as a member of Christendom, evident in the wrath they directed toward the various Anabaptist groups.

Again, the issues of repentance, salvation, righteousness, obedience, etc. can only be understood through the lens of what it means to be a Christian. This was as true for the Reformers as it was for the Medieval Catholicism they confronted. For the Reformers, “Christian” encompassed all baptized (“christened”) individuals, a view they supported by identifying Israel – God’s covenant household defined by sacramental sign (circumcision) – as the Old Covenant “Church.” They made Christ’s Church roughly synonymous with Old Covenant Israel, thereby bringing a confused framework to their consideration of the issues of law, obedience and ethics. In general, they looked to Sinai and Israel’s relationship with God to define and understand Christian obedience, evident in the Reformed emphasis on the Decalogue as “eternal moral law” and the centerpiece of Christian obligation to law. So the Westminster Confession of Faith:

*“The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons [Christians] as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God, the Creator, who gave it. **Neither doth Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.**”* (emphasis added)

The Westminster Larger Catechism further elaborates on this:

“The moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, directing and binding every one to personal, perfect, and perpetual conformity and obedience thereunto, in the frame and disposition of the whole man, soul and body, and in performance of all those duties of holiness and righteousness which he oweth to God and man: promising life upon the fulfilling, and threatening death upon the breach of it.” (WLC 93)

*“Although they that are regenerate, and believe in Christ, be delivered from the moral law as a covenant of works, so as thereby they are neither justified nor condemned; yet, besides the general uses thereof common to them with all men, it is of special use, to show them how much they are bound to Christ for his fulfilling it, and enduring the curse thereof in their stead, and for their good; and thereby to provoke them to more thankfulness, and to express the same in their greater care to conform themselves thereunto **as the rule of their obedience.**”* (WLC 97, emphasis added)

The point here is not to single out Reformed Theology, but to demonstrate the truth that one’s understanding of law, obedience, repentance, righteousness, etc. in relation to the Christian life depends absolutely on one’s understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Traditional Reformed Theology has skewed (or underemphasized) the crucial matter of *christiformity* (as explained here), but so have other theological traditions, with the same result that they, too, have misconstrued the issue of Christian ethics.

The Christian’s obligation to law is his obligation to share in Christ’s true humanness as the Last Adam and be perfected in it. This perfecting work is the work of the Holy Spirit, but a work that does not occur in a vacuum. It depends on human effort, both that of the Christian himself and the larger body of Christ. The Spirit transforms people into Christ’s likeness, but as they labor to *“be being transformed by the renewing of their minds”* (Romans 12:1-2). So the Spirit’s work in individuals takes place through His work in the body; He gifts the individual members of the body so that all will be conformed to Christ through His empowering of the ministration of those gifts; in this way, *“the Body causes the growth of the Body”* (cf. Ephesians 2:11-23, 4:1-16; also Colossians 1:28-29).

The concern and goal in Christian obedience is conformity to Christ, and the substance of Christ-likeness is human existence defined by love. This is proven by the fact that Jesus is both True God (1 John 4:8, 16) and True Man – man as divine image-son. Put simply, *conformity to the truth and ethic of love is obedience to God’s law*. The Jews understood that Yahweh’s Torah concerned the righteousness and obligation of love; sincere, uncompromised love for God and neighbor was what it meant to “keep Torah” (cf. Deuteronomy 6:1-9 with Matthew 7:12, 22:35-40). So Paul, the devout Pharisee, understood this truth, though he defined it with a natural mind rather than in terms of the Messiah. But when he came to know Jesus in truth, the “law of love” took on a whole new meaning (cf. Romans 13:8-10; 2 Corinthians 5:13-17; Galatians 5:13-14; Philippians 3:1-9; 1 Timothy 1:12-16). Paul came to see obedience as life in Christ characterized by a mind informed and governed by His mind and love; hence his common exhortation, “Do you not know who you are?” (Romans 6:3-4, 7:1-4; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:1-20; etc.).