

# Obedience

*Words of Spirituality*

by ENZO BIANCHI

The criterion in Christian obedience is the Holy Spirit, who interiorizes the demands of the Gospel in each of us

---

"We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The great biblical principle of obedience is profoundly liberating. From a biblical perspective, obedience is inseparable from freedom: only those who are free can obey, and it is only by obeying the Gospel that one enters into the fullness of freedom. Bonhoeffer put it succinctly: "Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is anarchy." Before we look more closely at the Christian *proprium* of obedience, we should recall its anthropological basis. There is a fundamental form of obedience each of us is called to assume with regard to our past, our origins, our body, our family - in short, we are called to obey a series of situations, people, times, places, events, and conditions that have preceded us and given us our identity, and over which we have not had the slightest control or possibility to choose. The baggage already waiting for each of us at birth accompanies us along the path of our existence. Believers see this obedience as 'creaturely' and recognize it as part of the acceptance of limits that defines their identity as created beings before their Creator. The acceptance of limits allows men and women to become human by resisting the temptation of totality - in other words, the temptation to make themselves equal to God. In the Genesis account of creation, this is the meaning of the prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil: human beings are human to the extent that they limit their ambition. The human relationship with God takes place within the domain of the limited and the finite. According to the Bible, obedience is to be understood in the context of this relationship - in other words, within the category of the covenant. This is the relationship with God that makes obedience to the Law revealed to Moses on Sinai liberating and even joyful.

If the Law is a manifestation of the will of God, the partner who dictates the covenant, obedience to all of God's commands becomes the expression of the desire of the believer, who loves his or her God and finds joy in doing God's will. The formula used in Exodus 24:7 to indicate the people of Israel's acceptance of God's will as expressed in the Law is significant: "All that the Lord has said, we will do and we will heed." Here praxis, or putting the word into practice, comes before listening to the word, as if to suggest that the fundamental assent Israel offers God is more important than a specification of the contents of each single command. This text also means that it is only when we put the Word into practice - in other words, when we obey it concretely - that we truly understand it. This grounding of obedience within the covenant, a relationship in which the believer listens to his or her God, sets the tone for Christian obedience as well. In the New Testament listening, intended in the sense of perception of God's will, is fully realized only when a person obeys God's will in faith and through his or her actions. The fulfillment of listening (*akoúein/audire*) is obedience (*hypakoúein/obaudire*) - that form of obedience that consists in believing. Paul speaks several times of the "obedience of faith," by which he means to say that faith takes the form of obedience, and that obedience reveals one's faith. The *proprium* of Christian obedience, however, is found in Christ's own obedience. The three most significant texts that speak of Christ's obedience (Romans 5:19: "through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous"; Philippians 2:8: "(Christ) humbled himself, becoming obedient to death"; Hebrews 5:8: "(Christ) learned obedience from what he suffered") form a synthesis of the life, mystery and saving work of Jesus, describing Jesus' life and death as a form of obedience.

At the center of Jesus' obedience is his filial relationship with the Father, and at the heart of his obedience is love for his Father and for his brothers and sisters, for humanity. The fourth Gospel underscores Jesus' obedience by presenting him as a person who is totally dispossessed of himself and who, in all that he says, does and is, continues to point to the Father who sent him. This loving obedience gives meaning to his living and dying, and makes even his death on the cross an act of freedom. This is where Christian obedience finds its place, its 'measure' and its form: the form obedience takes in our lives is given by the Holy Spirit, who insists that we express our obedience creatively and responsibly, not legalistically. Yes, the criterion in Christian obedience is the Holy Spirit, who interiorizes the demands of the Gospel in each of us and leads us to see them as expressions of God's will, so that we can then apply them to our lives to the point that they become expressions of our own will. In the light of this fundamental obedience, we can understand, accept and carry out other acts of obedience, in response to requests in which we perceive a mediation of God's will. As we do so, we should always remember that everything should be governed by the Gospel and submitted to the decisive criterion of the Gospel. When forms of mediation of God's will (ecclesiastical authorities, theological doctrines, monastic rules, cultural rites, etc.) take the place of God and claim that obedience is due to them, they should be subjected to criticism and led back to obedience to the Gospel, because "we must obey God rather than men."

From: ENZO BIANCHI, *Words of Spirituality*,  
Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London 2002