

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Study Nine

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Martin Bleby

THE GOSPEL—OPTION OR COMMAND?

The gospel is often presented as one option among others to be considered and taken up, or a choice that can be made between two different ways of living. While God uses these presentations to bring many people to Himself in repentance and faith, the question can still be asked: Does this style of presentation truly represent the human situation which the gospel addresses, and is it consistent with the gospel itself?

The Human Situation

Such presentations can be based on an assumption that human beings who are sinners are in a position to be able to consider options fairly and make responsible choices. Paul the apostle's estimate of sinners' readiness to make a reasonable response is not so confident. They have already 'exchanged the truth about [literally *of*] God for a lie', and in doing so 'they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened'. What they call their wisdom and common sense, then, is actually foolishness: 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools' (Rom. 1:25, 21, 22). In this depraved state any choice they make that they consider reasonable will be disoriented. So determined are they to 'suppress the truth by their wickedness' (Rom. 1:18, NIV), that they end up calling good evil and evil good: 'They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them' (Rom. 1:32).

In such a position, sinners wrongly regard themselves as occupying some independent ground apart from and over against God—even though in reality 'he is not far from each one of us', since He is 'above all and through all and in all', such that 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:27, 28; Eph. 4:6). It is possible that when the gospel is presented as some kind of option or choice, sinners in that position may respond in a way that maintains their illusory independence and separateness of God—even that in making a choice by their own act of will they have brought themselves into a right relationship with God.

It takes more than that to turn a sinner around. Jesus said to his disciples, 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (John 15:16). It takes an action of God to cause a person to be 'born from above' (John 3:3, 7). Such new birth is 'not . . . of the will of the flesh or of the

will of man, but of God' (John 1:13). This is not something we can do for ourselves, however reasonably well-informed, from some supposed independent position over against God. Martin Luther wrote:

'free-will' without God's grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bondsman of evil, since it cannot turn itself to good.¹

That people do repent and believe despite our inadequate and deficient presentations of the gospel is testimony to God's ample grace and not to our competence or readiness to respond.

The Gospel as Choice?

Does the gospel not present itself as an option or a choice? Moses presented Israel with a choice:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob (Deut. 30:19–20).

It needs to be noted that this relates specifically to God's promise to Israel to give them the land, and to the law given through Moses at Sinai:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess (Deut. 30:15–18).

Nor is it true that Israel was being faced with a choice between going the way of relationship with the Lord and going some other way. These words were spoken in the context of God's covenant with Israel. They were already locked into a relationship with God from which there was no escape. The question was whether they would prosper in that relationship, or perish, under God's hand.

Joshua similarly faced Israel with a choice:

Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD (Josh. 24:14–15).

Note that the injunction 'choose this day whom you will serve' does not relate to a choice between serving the Lord and serving someone else. The over all command is: 'revere the LORD'. The words 'choose this day whom you will serve' relate to the subsidiary choice between the idol-gods of the Euphrates region or the idol-gods of the Canaanite region—both of which will prove unsatisfactory. Once again, they are already locked into a relationship with God from which they cannot opt out. In that relationship, worship of any other gods will

¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* [1525], tr. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, James Clarke, Cambridge, 1957, p. 104.

prove disastrous. That is why, in this setting, Joshua insists that, as long as they persist in their present sinful mode and mindset, there can be no forgiveness for them:

You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good (Josh. 24:19–20).²

This is why Paul said of the law in this setting, to those who desired to remain in this setting outside of a saving relationship with Jesus as Messiah:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’ But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, ‘Whoever does the works of the law will live by them’ (Gal. 3:10–12).

These Scriptures about choosing are sometimes used in connection with the gospel, urging people to choose life in Christ. They cannot rightly be used in this unmediated way, outside of their context in the life of Israel and hence outside their context in the whole plan and purpose of God, which has Jesus Christ at its centre.³

Is there no New Testament passage that speaks in a similar way about our choice being determinative in the process of becoming a believer? What about Revelation 3:20, which has sometimes been used in this way, where Christ says:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

Something has been made of Holman Hunt’s depiction of this in his painting ‘The Light of the World’, where there is no handle on the outside of the door—it has to be opened from the inside. Such considerations, we suspect, pander to the sinful flesh’s propensity to want to have the upper hand and the final say. The words are actually addressed to believers who already belong to Christ, and are out of place in an evangelistic appeal to non-believers. There is no New Testament passage in connection with the gospel that equates with Deuteronomy 30:15–20 or Joshua 24:14–15.

Do not the closing words of Hosea’s prophecy give us the true picture of where we all are?

For the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them (Hos. 14:9).

There is only one set of ways for human living, and that is ‘the ways of the LORD’. All of us, without exception, are within those ways, walled in on both sides. Either we ‘walk’ in these ways, uprightly more or less in a straight line, or we ‘stumble’ in them; that is, we resent being ‘confined’ in this way and we career from one side to the other trying to get out, but all the time we are only beating our heads against the brick wall. Either way, upright or wicked, we are still in the ways of the Lord, and cannot get out of them, and *in them* we either reap the reward or suffer the consequences.

² Compare Deut. 29:19–20: ‘All who hear the words of this oath and bless themselves, thinking in their hearts, “We are safe even though we go our own stubborn ways” (thus bringing disaster on moist and dry alike)—the LORD will be unwilling to pardon them, for the LORD’s anger and passion will smoke against them. All the curses written in this book will descend on them, and the LORD will blot out their names from under heaven’

³ See further: Martin Bleby, *God Speaking: Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2006, pp. 37–57, 72–98.

The Gospel as Command

The gospel in the New Testament comes to us not as an option but as a command. While God has not up to this point brought final judgement on the unfaithfulness of the nations or of Israel, this situation has now changed with the coming of the Messiah Jesus and his saving death and resurrection. In setting a day of final judgement, God has mercifully provided a way for us of not coming under that final judgement through accepting by faith the judgement executed in His Son on the cross as rightly our own judgement, and believing in God's vindication of him in resurrection as our own in union with him.⁴ In view of this, the gospel now goes out to all people—Jew and Gentile nations alike—as an urgent and inescapable command:

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30–31).

In the light of what we have said already about the depraved state of sinners, are we in this situation any more capable of obeying a command than we were of responding to an invitation? We need to estimate rightly the power of God's commanding word to put into effect what it says:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa. 55:10–11).

Inherent in what God says is His blessing to enable it to happen. As God said to the fish and the birds, and no less to the human beings:

God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth' . . . God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion . . .' (Gen. 1:22, 28).

So it was in creation:

Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light (Gen. 1:3).

So it is in redemption:

For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

Those who bring the word of the gospel must trust God to do His work in that word. This will save us from issuing the command in our own name, or with our own forcefulness, as our flesh might prefer:

we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God (2 Cor. 4:2).

⁴ See John 12:31–33; Mark 16:16; Rom. 6:3–11; Gal. 2:19–20; John 5:24; 3:36.

This expectation will also shape the ways in which we present the gospel:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1–5).

When a herald is sent to promulgate a decree, he does not have to get it across by the force of his own personality, nor does he necessarily have a personal vested interest in the outcome. His job is simply to announce the edict, according to the way things now are.

We may, then, expect that when we announce the gospel, the God-given ability to respond with glad obedience will be inherent in the command. And so we find it to be:

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

We will come to look at what it means to be ‘obedient to the faith’, and how that is different from what we normally regard as obedience.

This command is not just for a minority group. We have already seen it is for ‘all people everywhere’ (Acts 17:30). Paul found himself at the spearhead of the taking of this gospel-command to the nations:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God . . . the gospel concerning his Son . . . Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1, 3, 4–6).

This took him far and wide:

In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand’ (Rom. 15:17–21).

We note that the effect of the gospel-command is to bring about obedience:

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

It is also possible, however, to refuse to take up this obedience:

But not all have obeyed the good news (Rom. 10:16).

This has severe and lasting consequences:

when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will

suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (2 Thess. 1:7–9).

Clearly, this is a life-and-death matter. The gospel is powerful and far-reaching. To obey the gospel, then, is not just to take up an option in response to an invitation. P. T Forsyth summarises the matter:

The feeble gospel preaches ‘God is ready to forgive’; the mighty gospel preaches ‘God has redeemed’.⁵

What, then, does it mean to ‘obey the gospel’?

Questions for Discussion:

- *What experience have we had of the gospel being presented as an option or choice? What has followed from that?*
- *What experience have we had of the gospel being presented as command? What response has come from that?*
- *How does the gospel presented as command differ from the gospel presented as imposition?*

THE GOSPEL—ANOTHER LAW?

Sinners under guilt seek to justify themselves. Often they will do this by setting up a law, however demanding, which they will then seek to fulfill, and thereby they consider themselves justified by their actions in meeting the demands of their law. Often this is done by taking a ready-made law that is at hand and using it in this way. Practically every human religion and mode of living operates in this manner. Scripture abounds in instances, both in the Old and New Testaments, of people attempting to do this with the law of God. The law of God is not amenable to this treatment, for at its heart is a faith-relationship—‘You shall love the Lord your God’—with the God from whom alone our righteousness comes. Any attempt to justify or ‘righteous-ify’ ourselves by our own so-called fulfilling of God’s law goes right against that gracious saving act of God in bringing us into right relationship with Himself, and so grievously breaks the very law it is trying to keep.⁶

It is common for human persons who have been operating in this way, when they come across the gospel of Christ, to regard the gospel in a similar light, as a new law to fulfill—perhaps a higher and better law than the one they have been used to, but still one that is there to be fulfilled in this self-justifying way. So bondage to one set of commands is substituted for bondage to another—even when the new set of commands is something as noble as to love God and to love one another. This may lead people to think that thereby they are obeying the gospel.

All cultures suffer from this propensity, and Australian indigenous cultures are no exception. When the gospel has come to aboriginal people, it has resulted sometimes in Christian practices, such as going to church and singing Christian songs, to be substituted for the old ceremonies without much change in mindset. It was in one such setting that it occurred to me to say: ‘To obey the gospel is to obey the reality that you are forgiven’. This turned a light on for some.

⁵ P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, p. 52.

⁶ See Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37; Jer. 7:8–10; Rom. 2:17–24; Gal. 2:5–14; Mark 10:18; Phil. 3:4–11.

This is borne out by New Testament references to what might be taken to be a Christian ‘law’. What does James mean, for instance, by ‘the perfect law, the law of liberty’ (see James 1:21–25)? This is spoken of in connection with being ‘doers of the word, and not merely hearers’ (James 1:22). What ‘word’ is that? It is ‘the implanted word that has the power to save your souls’ (James 1:21)—namely the saving gospel. This is ‘the perfect law, the law of liberty’, which we look into, as into a mirror, to see what we are really like—in other words, to see what we have been made by this gospel (see James 1:23–25). It is in remembering and not forgetting this that keeps us from being ‘merely hearers who deceive themselves’. Similarly, what does Peter say it is that upholds us in ‘faith . . . goodness . . . knowledge . . . self-control . . . godliness . . . mutual affection . . . love’ (2 Pet. 1:5–7)? It is the remembrance of the forgiveness of sins:

anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins (2 Pet. 1:9).

This is how we are kept ‘from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Pet. 1:8). When Paul speaks of having become ‘obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted’ (Rom. 6:17), what is ‘the form of teaching’ to which we have become obedient? Paul makes this equivalent to having been ‘set free from sin’ (Rom. 6:18). So ‘the form of teaching’ here is nothing other than the saving gospel. The ‘law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ is that which ‘has set you free from the law of sin and of death’ (Rom. 8:2),⁷ that is, the gospel. To ‘obey the gospel’ then is to obey the reality that we are forgiven and have been made children of God.

Paul said to King Agrippa: ‘I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’ (Acts 26:19). We may take it that Paul was obeying a command given to him by Christ to proclaim the gospel. But Paul does not say he was obedient to what he was told to do in the vision; he says he was obedient to the vision itself. The vision was of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, the one who loved Paul so as to give himself to death for Paul, the one in whom Paul found himself rightly crucified, so that no longer Paul but Christ might be his life. This was the personal reality to which Paul was ‘not disobedient’. It was the love Christ had for him and for all that constrained him to proclaim the reconciling gospel to all.⁸ In Paul’s own account of the vision, the only command he is given is to ‘get up and stand on your feet’ (Acts 26:16). The rest is an account of what Christ himself has done and would do:

I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue 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, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:16–18).

This is the heavenly reality to which Paul was ‘not disobedient’.⁹

Questions for Discussion:

- *What propensity have we found in ourselves and others to turn the gospel into another law to be fulfilled by us in the course of our own self-justification? What does that do to our actual guilt?*

⁷ Not that there are two ‘laws’ here, such that one can be played off against the other. Both are the one good law of God in Himself, who both judges evil and saves by grace—who kills and who makes alive (see Deut. 30:39).

⁸ See Acts 9:3–5; Gal. 2:19–20; Col. 3:4; 2 Cor. 5:14–21.

⁹ I am grateful to Grant Thorpe for some of the insights contained in these two paragraphs.

- *What difference does it make to know obedience to the gospel as obedience to the reality that we are forgiven and are children of God?*

FAITH PLUS OBEDIENCE?

One way our flesh still holds out against this is by acknowledging the need for and the reality of faith, and all that happens in new birth, but to require that faith then must be supplemented by the obedience to God's commandments that flows from it—as if those are two things that can be separate from each other. The flesh readily responds to this 'challenge'¹⁰ and in the blink of an eye will seize upon it to further its own agenda of self-justification.

This can affect the way we misread or misinterpret a number of passages. When the apostles said, 'we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him' (Acts 5:32), they were certainly not saying that the Holy Spirit is given as a reward for obedience, for the tenses show that the giving happens before the obedience—'whom God has given [already, in the past] to those who obey him [now, in the present]'. But nor were they saying that our obedience follows on from God's gift of the Spirit. Obedience is a function of the Spirit and comes with him in the one package with the forgiveness of sins.¹¹ The King James Version translated Jesus' words in John 14:15 as: 'If ye love me, keep my commandments'. It comes as a struggle to some people to find that this was not actually a command but simply a description of what would be: 'If you love me, *you will* keep my commandments' (NRSV). Other passages are to be read in this light. After speaking of Jesus as 'the atoning sacrifice [propitiation] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world', the apostle John goes on to say:

by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments . . . whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection (1 John 2:2, 3 5).

Obedying God's commandments here is not a secondary add on, but so much part and parcel of knowing him that it is an identifying mark of such relationship. Is He saying that by obeying God's word we get to love God perfectly? Is it not rather that God's love for us has come to its goal in the doing of His will in us. When John says: 'All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them', he is not saying that abiding in Christ is the result of us obeying his commandments, but that this obedience belongs in this abiding relationship, through the indwelling Spirit: 'And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us' (1 John 3:24). When John later says, 'the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments', he immediately tells us how this has come about by an action of God from above:

And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:3–5 compare John 1:12–13; 3:3, 5, 7).

When Jesus was asked, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' with what passion and urgency did he reply: 'This is the work of God, that you *believe in him whom he has sent*' (John 6:28–29)!

¹⁰ One thing that disturbs me about this commonly-used word is that a challenge is generally issued and accepted in an adversarial situation, from a position of one over against another, whereas Christ spoke of himself being 'with' us and 'in' us and of us being in him (see John 14:10, 17, 18, 20, 23; 17:21, 23, 26).

¹¹ Compare Ezek. 36:27; Jer. 31:33–34.

What do those who come to the light discover? That, perhaps without them even realising it at the time, ‘their deeds have been done *in God*’ (John 3:21).

Questions for Discussion:

- *What is the danger of requiring obedience as something in addition to faith? What does that then make faith and obedience out to be?*
- *What are the implications of being ‘in’ Christ and having him ‘in’ us for our understanding and experience of faith and obedience*

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Having said all this, we may still find it difficult to come to this emphatic statement of P. T. Forsyth:

And by this obedience of faith, of course, is not meant the obedience that grows out of faith but, here as always, the obedience that is faith—faith being the greatest act a will can do, as its absolute self-assignment to the grace of the Holiest and His holy love.¹²

His ‘of course’ and ‘as always’ may not be as obvious to us as it was to Forsyth. But it may be worth our humbly working on it. Forsyth is saying here that once God has brought us to faith He has got us body, spirit and soul—we are His. And that is everything. With this Martin Luther concurs:

You see that the First Commandment, which says, ‘You shall worship one God,’ is fulfilled by faith alone. Though you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head, you would still not be righteous or worship God or fulfill the First Commandment, since God cannot be worshiped unless you ascribe to him the glory of truthfulness and all goodness which is due to him. This cannot be done by works but only by the faith of the heart. Not by the doing of works but by believing do we glorify God and acknowledge that he is truthful. Therefore faith alone is the righteousness of a Christian and the fulfilling of all the commandments, for he who fulfills the First Commandment has no difficulty in fulfilling all the rest.¹³

What are the implications of this for how we go about gospel ministry? Paul wrote to Timothy:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching (2 Tim. 4:1–2).

What about those who confess Christ, but whose lives do not seem to match belonging to him? Paul wrote to the Galatians:

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:1–2).

¹² P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority: In Relation to Certainty, Sanctity and Society* [1913], NCPI, Blackwood, 2004, p. 67.

¹³ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* [1520], in *Three Treatises*, tr. W. A. Lambert, Harold J. Grim, Fortress Press, p. 288.

The use of the phrase ‘the law of Christ’, given what we have said above, should alert us to the reality that this, no less than ‘primary evangelism’, is a ministry of presenting the saving gospel. It is to be brought to sinners inside the church no less than to those outside.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What does it mean for us to say that ‘the obedience of faith’ is ‘the obedience that is faith’?*
- *What are the implications of this for how we go about gospel ministry both outside and inside the church?*
- *What dangers might there be in using people’s sinful disobedience as our starting point for formulating our theology and pastoral practice?*
- *What difference might it make to take as our starting point the saving grace of God?*