

## Obeying God Rather than People

Down through the ages, Christians around the world have faced pressures on every front to adapt the message and praxis of faith to the multitude. Those who have rocked the boat and pursued non-conformist allegiances have all too often been branded pariahs and persecuted for their faith. On the other side of the ledger have been many whose approach to faith in a secular world has been more pragmatic. They have rendered Christianity acceptable, moderate and contemporary, but in the process lost spiritual power, uniqueness and the capacity to change the world supernaturally through Truth, the way Jesus did.

We are made for community and God wants us to be contemporary, but according to His terms. We have a choice: to obey God in things that count, or go with the flow (the natural inclination) and see where the current of social expectations carries us. The two are incompatible. Christianity is only viable to the extent that God's will is supreme in our lives, together with His grace to execute it.

*There will always be a cost*

As I sat under the huge tent and listened, spellbound, to Brother Andrew speak about smuggling Bibles into Eastern Europe, it came home to me that the true Christian's priorities are often at odds with what society believes to be important. Like many others, I was electrified by the stories he told about loading his car with Bibles and getting them through checkpoints, under the noses of communist guards posted behind razor wire to prevent the very things he was doing. He told us that, if we were bold, we too could take Bibles into the USSR, Czechoslovakia, North Korea or China. Christians living behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains were crying out for the Word of God; a new generation of courageous Christians could defy the might of communism and breach walls of atheism with the Gospel.

But there was a note of caution. According to Brother Andrew, we had to count the cost. In these very countries Christians were paying the ultimate price for proclaiming God's Word. "Before you say 'Yes'", he warned, "consider the possibility that you may be arrested and put in a Soviet jail for spreading God's Word. Your family may never again hear from you. You may end up going to a country like Albania, the world's first officially atheistic state, where missionaries run the risk of being detected and killed." If we made a commitment to smuggling Bibles, we should be prepared to be arrested, beaten, imprisoned and lose everything we had, including life itself. What was more important, obeying God or obeying man? Carrying out His will or complying with the fiat of non-Christian rulers? Respond to the call, by all means, but do so with eyes wide open.

From Bible times, men and women of God have had to make the same sorts of choices. Many have been broken, in furnaces, rejection, deserts, pain, financial sacrifice, torture and personal loss, as a result of electing to obey God. Sometimes they have been miraculously saved from their enemies; at other times they have perished (Hebrews 11:32-38). Some of the strongest churches today are located in nations where believers have to make the same decisions,

often at great personal cost. The most viable branch of Christianity exists in China, where believers face ongoing suffering and privation. Christian leaders in that country face constant threat of discovery, betrayal and arrest.

In you live in the West, you may not confront such dire choices, but your faith will be challenged nevertheless. I remember the first time I met Christians from behind what was then the Iron Curtain. I was participating in a Youth With A Mission outreach during the Munich Olympics. In a break with historical paranoia, a number of Warsaw Pact countries had allowed their citizens to travel to the West to witness the Olympics. Having grown up hearing stories of a suffering church under Soviet-style rule I was fascinated to hear these young men and women speaking openly of their faith in Christ. In my naivety I told them that Christians in the West regularly prayed for their brethren living under Communism. I will never forget the comment made by a young Romanian man. "We pray for you, in the West. Living under communism, as we do, we know we have to make choices. Either we are believers or we are not. But you have to struggle to live for Jesus in a society filled with consumer goods and shallow moral and spiritual values that compete with Jesus every day." What they were saying was that State-sponsored opposition to the church forced believers to choose. God's way or man's way. No half-measures. Obey one and be prepared to disobey the other. No subtle compromises were possible.

There will always be a price tag attached to authentic Christian faith. It has been said that those whom Jesus invites to follow him, he calls to "come and die". From the moment a person decides to commit his or her life to Christ, a mortal challenge is set up, a struggle between understanding and doing the will of the Invisible and conforming to the will of the visible. Jesus demands absolute obedience. So does the world system. Something has to give. Our response to this titanic struggle for heart and mind will define the extent of His Lordship in our hearts.

### *Recognising God's Delegated Rulers*

"But, we live in a non-Christian world", I hear you say. The Bible acknowledges this and affirms God's mandate to earthly rulers. "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or to governors, as to them sent by him for the punishment of those who do evil, and for the praise of them that do well. For this is the will of God..." (1 Peter 2:13-15, cf Romans 13:1-6). Jesus taught that Christians should, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" (Matthew 22:21, cf 1 Timothy 2:1-2). Human rule nominally acts under God's authority. Christians should not be afraid of government. We are not nihilists or anarchists. We believe God sets up rulers and authorities for our good. The alternative to order is chaos. But our ultimate allegiance is not to human government. When there is a conflict between the two, we are called to make God's choice. Christians should be model citizens – to the extent that the integrity of our faith and obedience to God are not compromised.

The first Christians had to decide whether to obey Caesar when he demanded worship as a god, or refuse to do so and run the risk of being put to death for worshipping "another king" (Jesus). The choice was that graphic. The earth is

God's (Psalm 24:1, 2), but people have the awesome responsibility of governing human societies. Attempts to set up alternative, Christian theocracies have invariably turned into dictatorships. How ironic! Some rulers recognise their God-given authority and make an effort to rule with justice; others abuse power and become corrupt because they are strong and the opportunities to do so exist.

As believers we need to be careful not to be caught up by the deception that one form of human government is more or less godly than others. Godless materialism is just as evil as godless communism. Both shut out the rulership of Christ. Neither is sanctified. Biblically speaking, Christians are commanded to obey secular laws, but not where those laws violate God's standards and requirements.

### *Drawing the line*

The issue for ordinary Christians is where to draw the line between what God commands (and how we understand that) and what people expect. Secular humanistic leaders frequently rail against God and the Church. We should not be surprised. They have different priorities and vastly divergent world views and objectives. Their hearts are figuratively made of "stone" (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:25-27); their consciences are seared (1 Timothy 4:2), they cannot see because they are spiritually blind (Luke 4:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4). We must avoid being snared by their paradigm nets and locked up in ideological cages, unable to break out and proclaim the message of liberty in Christ.

Few of us have to make regular choices for Christ that bring us into overt conflict with the world. Some Christians do foolish things, peremptory actions that stem from misguided enthusiasm; they experience the consequences and believe they have been persecuted for their faith. Let me explain. I was sacked from my first job for actions I thought were the will of God. Without giving much thought to the end result, I put Christian tracts (lots of them) in the company mail my employer (Australia's largest stevedoring business) sent its clients. Things came to a head when my boss realized I was the culprit and our professional relationship ceased. I was shown the door. I believe God was showing me there are sometimes wiser ways of approaching these matters.

Others, by reason of behavioral quirks, mercurial attitudes or personality traits, create barriers that shut themselves inside and the rest of the world outside. The Christian community that lives like this will ultimately become irrelevant and vanish. Only men and women full of the Holy Spirit will have the moral and spiritual strength to be different in the vacuum that constitutes modern living.

As Christians, God asks for the reins of our lives. No one is superior to Him; no law is higher than His Word. Jesus commanded that we, "seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). But what if the human laws under which we live have been promulgated by a communist or Islamic government? What if laws that purport to liberate moral behaviour are sponsored by immoral legislators? Should we rebel against such authority, or boycott those who comply with ungodly laws? The first Christians faced the same dilemma. When dragged before the Jewish rulers for preaching the Gospel, Peter declared, "We ought to

obey God rather than man” (4:19). Clearly, the choice was between obeying the Holy Spirit and complying with the dictates of society. When faced with stark choices and real consequences, do you go against the grain (always more harder option) and obey God or follow the spoken or inferred dictates of people?

### *Making the Right Choices*

Some people take this choice to ungodly extremes. They vandalize abortion clinics; refuse to pay taxes or even to vote, on the grounds that they no longer belong to the world. The community of the Kingdom of God is a supernatural entity, but it exists on the earth. It cannot function by withdrawing or being parsimonious or elitist. Sure, we are “in the world, but not of it”; our King is Jesus; our rule is the Constitution of the Kingdom of God; our standard is the divine nature He has placed in each one of us. However, Biblical Christians ought to be reliable citizens, not objecting for the sake of being objectionable, but living to glorify Christ in practical ways. If we want to be relevant in a world where rebellion, rejection, abuse of power and authority and rugged individualism (“everyone did what was right in his own eyes”, Numbers 17:6b – sound familiar?) are the norm, we need to have a response to life that is predicated on the Truth and the way Jesus lived when he came to live amongst us.

Some Christians find it hard to live in godly ways in a secular society. Fear of the world (and peoples’ negative reactions) becomes an obsession. When it does, there is only a fine line to cross before such groups withdraw from community or become extremists. Witness the tragic deaths of the Branch Davidians in Waco Texas, or hundreds of followers of the Jim Jones’ cult, who died in the jungle of Guyana rather than acknowledge earthly rulers. That is not God’s way.

Furthermore, as Christians in a pluralistic society, we need to be careful to avoid rejection of authority for its own sake. Let me give an example. A generation ago, my father was born at home. That was the norm. My children have been home schooled overseas, where viable alternatives did not exist for a period. In some countries home churches are the only way Christians can worship together safely. By contrast, in some Christian quarters today there is a creeping antipathy towards anything to do with secular government, such that home births, home churches and home schools are increasingly adopted as deliberate forms of rejecting government hospitals, denominational churches and secular schools, anything to do with “the system”. Vaccinations against diseases, blood transfusions and other medical interventions are spurned as un-Christian. Such excesses can become distractions from Biblical faith.

Christians who make a difference do often run counter to public opinion. Reasonable people don’t change society. They live as passengers, allowing others to shape their images and belief systems. Jesus calls us to shake off the encumbrances of obedience to the expectations of others and give priority to establishing what God wants. However, this is not a mask for ultra-conservatism, rebellion, arrogance, or standing against something simply because it doesn’t appeal to us. Our personal tastes are not the barometer. God’s Word is the yardstick. A lot of legalism is based on culture, traditions and the personal proclivities of leaders and image-makers of the moment, not divine absolutes.

In some countries believers have to choose between following Jesus and adopting the underlying ideology or religion of the State. When conversion to Christianity is a capital offence; when Christian parents lose their children because the authorities want them to grow up as Muslims; when church services are monitored or infiltrated by party cadres posing as believers; the choice has to be made. Not a theoretical selection, but one that comes at great personal cost. To submit to the State or obey God. How would we react in such circumstances?

This is a complex subject, but the choice is clear. Either we are in debt to people, to please them, to live according to their expectations, to fit into their mould. Or we are in debt to Christ, to put Him first and give him our allegiance. As Jesus said, no one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). The decision reveals who is Lord of our lives?

It takes enormous courage to swim against the stream, to live by values and priorities that are not shared by those around us. The natural inclination is simply to agree, to avoid conflict and to rationalize our actions. This is why we need to draw on God's grace, to teach us to say "No" (Titus 1:11-14) and give us the capacity to act on Godly convictions. God has promised the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32). He gives us inner strength.

*What about Christian leaders?*

What about obedience to leaders in the Christian community? The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus gives leaders to the Church as His gifts (Ephesians 4:11-13). Spiritual leaders have a special mandate to care for the people of God and are accountable to Him for the use of their authority (Heb 13:17). This is an awesome responsibility.

Any position of leadership can be used to manipulate people. Having seen the best and worst in leadership, and the variations that occur from one culture to another (and can cause misunderstandings to outsiders) I have come to the conclusion that most Christian leaders are honourable men and women. They are human and fallible, but if their hearts are right before God He will anoint, direct and use them to build up His Kingdom and peoples' lives. It is better to start from the position that they are listening to the Holy Spirit, and walk in submission, as though we were yielding to the Lord, praying for them and trusting God to do the right thing through their lives and decisions. If they fall into error, the bottom line remains that our ultimate obligation is to "obey God rather than men" and we have to take appropriate action, but we can only make valid assessments if our hearts are humble before the Holy Spirit.

Submission does not come naturally, but it is God's Biblical way. Not just submission to leaders, but to one another (Ephesians 5:21). Mutual submission under the headship of Christ is ultimately unifying. It involves trust, self-denial, humility and a giving spirit. The church that functions according to His designs for leadership and discipleship will be dynamic and world-changing.

*Taking the first steps*

As a Christian believer, I am not “down” on the world? It is all a matter of perspective and the meaning of “world view”. Human logic and values are incompatible with God’s, because of the “fallen” nature of the human race. David said the “heathen rage” against God and His Anointed (Psalm 2:1, 2). The prophet Isaiah said that God’s thoughts are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8, 9). People living without God are effectively His “enemies” (Romans 5:10a). The notion that “there is a bit of good in everyone” is misleading, because it reaches the wrong conclusion, one that lionizes man and indirectly marginalizes God. Such logic can only lead to a sense of anomie and lack of defined identity and purpose. The destiny of fallen human reason is eternal separation from God. Light cannot live with darkness, lies cannot admit truth, and holiness cannot be allied to sinfulness. Christ came to make a “new man”, not patch up the old.

The problem with drawing lines in the sand this way is that non-Christians sometimes get the impression Christians are “holier-than-thou” or triumphalist. Jesus was none of these. He managed to steer a path through every kind of temptation, ancient versions of modern world views and people around him who paid lip service to God but lived for themselves. Jesus was radical, because he taught us how to get back to basics. Serving God is not about living above others, nor is it about trying to please everybody, but putting on His character (Romans 13:14) amid the cut and thrust of human society. As Christians, we do not lightly make decisions to obey God rather than yield to social expectations; nor do we do so because we are “contrary” (even though some people may see it this way), but because our relationship and the development of His character in our lives is paramount.

Finally, when we are forbidden to do what God demands, we have to weigh up the choices, step out in faith, trusting Him to do the rest, and learn from our experiences. Here’s an example. In my mid-teens I assembled a large collection of Christian tracts in many languages. During my work lunch hours I would walk through the public squares of Brisbane looking for people from other countries, give them tracts in their language and share the Gospel with them. One day a friend told me I needed permission to give out Christian literature. Foolishly, I believed him. I say “foolishly”, because when I visited the police I was granted a permit that allowed me to speak to people once a week, within a prescribed distance of a path beside the central post office, but not outside of this area. I was stymied. Jesus said “Go into the world and preach the Gospel” and I allowed a secular authority to box me into an area of four square metres. I eventually abandoned the idea and looked for more creative ways of approaching people. I still have the permit, to remind me that if we allow people to dictate how and where we obey God we run the risk of disobeying him. Paul’s bottom line was that, if he pleased men, he could not be the servant of Christ (Galatians 1:10). He didn’t go out of his way to make enemies; his lifestyle and commitment to Jesus were often enough to force people take sides for or against him.

If we aim to be relevant Christians in a world in which people expend their energies pleasing others, we need to show them graphically that real freedom

begins with submission - to Christ. If we obey God, he will honour us (1 Samuel 2:30c) and give us the liberating power of a new life to serve Him.