

On Christian Obedience: A Homiletical “Aha!”

Colleagues,

Many of us will be bumping into the word ‘obedience’ this Sunday. It’s featured heavily in the section of Romans 6 that the Revised Common Lectionary designates as the day’s Second Reading (Year A, Proper 8). Whether it also shows up in the sermons we preach or listen to will depend on the preacher’s willingness to tackle the topic. And yes, ‘tackle’ is the appropriate verb here. Obedience is not high on the list of favorite concepts in the wider culture that shapes us these days; and if the preacher is a Lutheran, then there’s that pesky business that our thinkers have been squabbling over since the sixteenth century, a set of questions packaged under the rubric, “Third Use of the Law.” Question One: is there such a use, or is there not? Or, in terms that plain people might employ, do the Ten Commandments have a positive role to play in the conversation that ensues when Jesus-trusters start sorting out what to do with their trust? More sharply, do they define the “new obedience” that our trust in Christ gives rise to? Werner Elert said no. His student, Ed Schroeder, has echoed that ‘no’ consistently over the decades. Even so, heads have bumped over “third use” in the brief history of our own Crossings Community. Take that as a sign of how stubborn a question this is.

Fiercer by far was the head-bumping that happened in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod of the sixties and seventies, “third use” being but one of the issues in contention, and a derivative one at that. Still, it came up, and fairly frequently, with epithets of “legalist” and “antinomian” being hurled back and forth between contenders. Among those caught in

the tumult of the day was one Richard Jungkuntz. (I write it that way for those of you who haven't heard of him.) Jungkuntz taught New Testament at Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, now located in Fort Wayne. He was also the first executive secretary of the Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations. The 1969 election of Jacob A. O. Preus as president of the LCMS led speedily to his dismissal from both posts. He continued his career as provost at the American Lutheran Church's Pacific Lutheran University, where he also served a brief stint as interim president. We're pleased at Crossings to count his son, Rich, as a member of the community. If you've followed Thursday Theology these past few years, you'll recall his occasional contributions, dispatched from the northeastern corner of Thailand that he presently calls home.

Rich recently transcribed a handwritten manuscript of one of his father's chapel homilies at PLU. We caught wind of this and asked for permission to pass it along. The piece is striking in its serendipity. For one thing, it speaks directly to the question of the Christian's "obedience," and what that entails. For another, we had just been looking at another sharp piece on the same topic, for which permission to publish could not be gotten. Jungkuntz approaches the matter from a somewhat different angle; even so, the essential point gets driven home, and very effectively. You'll want to consider this now as a touchstone for the usefulness of what you'll hear or hope to say when Sunday gets here.

And there's an added benefit. Next week we'll send you an analysis of the homily by Robert C. Schultz. Bob is a friend of Rich, and recalls Rich's father as a respected colleague. We think you'll appreciate his insights.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

“Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.” John 8:47 (RSV)

About fifteen years or so ago I attended a faculty meeting I’ll never forget. Actually, it was a joint faculty conference involving some eighty theological professors from two Lutheran seminaries. One of the major presentations at that conference was given by a New Testament scholar on the topic, “The Pauline Paraenesis.” Paraenesis is not some kind of disease, but just an old Greek word meaning exhortation. For instance, a typical Pauline paraenesis or exhortation would be a passage like this from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (4:4-6).

Now you notice that all the verbs in this exhortation are in the imperative mode, the mode of command. Well, the question being considered at that conference was whether such New Testament injunctions are in fact commandments in the sense of divine Law, or whether they are really just another form of the gracious Gospel, by which we learn that our sins are forgiven and that in Christ Jesus we are freed from the dictates and condemnations of God’s holy Law. And it was this latter interpretation that the New Testament scholar was eloquently arguing for in his presentation.

When he finished, there was of course a vigorous discussion, with many penetrating questions being asked—all of which the presenter patiently and persuasively answered. Until at last one

beady-eyed professor from the other seminary arose and said in severe and abrasive tones, "But listen here, Dr. B, it's obvious that you are completely wrong and in grievous error; after all, there have to be some moral absolutes in the Christian religion!" To which the essayist responded, "Like what, for instance?" "Like the Decalogue of Moses, sir, the Ten Commandments!" snapped back the critic. After a split-second of silence the essayist dismissed his critic's retort with a casual shrug, as he said, "Aw, shucks—not those dinky commandments?"

Well, that ended the discussion, I can tell you. For the conference immediately broke up in an uproar, with half of the professors shouting: "Heresy, heresy!" and the other half weakly claiming that maybe the essayist hadn't really meant what everyone had heard him say. This morning, however, I want to tell you, before God, that the essayist was really right; and, if I can, I'd like to try at least to explain why it's important for us to understand both what he meant and how it matters to us.

Let me begin with a little foreign language lesson (non-credit, pass/fail). But first I want to suggest that you think of some commandment of God, or your parents, or your teacher, or your boss on a summer job, or your drill sergeant—and ask yourself what English word, verb or noun, declares the kind of response the giver of the commandment expects from you. It's the verb 'obey' isn't it? And the noun is 'obedience'.

Now here comes the foreign language lesson. In Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, the words we translate with 'obey' and 'obedience' are υπακούω [hip-ah-koo-oh] and υπακοή [hip-ah-ko-ay]. "So what?" you say. Well, this is what: both those words come directly from the Greek verb meaning "to hear" (ακούω [ah-koo-oh]). So when you read in your New Testament the English translation 'obey' or 'obedience', you

really should think, not about capitulating to the will of someone who has enforcement power over you, but rather about “hearing” and what that implies.

Now, that isn’t just a fluke of the Greek language. For when the New Testament was translated into Latin by St. Jerome, the words he used for υποκούω and υποκουή were ‘oebodio’ and ‘oebodientia’, the very words from which we’ve derived our English ‘obey’ and ‘obedience’. And you know what? Those two Latin words are directly from the Latin verb ‘audio’, which means “to hear” (compare ‘audience’). But this little language lesson gets stranger still. For when Luther translated the New Testament into German, the word he used for obedience (Greek υπακουή) was ‘Gehorsamkeit’. And can you guess what ‘Gehorsamkeit’ is derived from? You’re right! It’s derived from the German word meaning “to hear,” viz. ‘hören’. And just by the way, my good friend, Professor Toven, tells me that in Norwegian the word for obedience is ‘adlydelse’, which really means “hearing,” or “paying attention to the sound of something.”

But what about the Old Testament? Well, it’s a funny thing in a way, but you won’t find the words ‘obey’ or ‘obedience’ anywhere in the whole Old Testament. Instead, when your English Bible uses these words (which, of course it does), the original Hebrew has the word שמע [she-mah], or a derivative of שמע, which means—you guessed it!—“to hear.”

Now what are we to make of all this? What we make of it is whether we’re Christian, or not; whether we are the lambs and sheep of the flock of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, or not. For “the sheep hear [their shepherd’s] voice,” as Jesus says in St. John’s Gospel, “and He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (10:3).

By our Baptism in Jesus’ name, the heavenly Father has made you

and me his very own. And that's why in our text Jesus can say, "He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

Okay, but what does that have to do with commandments and exhortations and injunctions? Just this. Do you remember when your little sister or brother had not yet learned to walk, and was just beginning to stand upright by holding on to the edge of a chair? And what did your dad do? He knelt on the floor just a foot or two away with his arms outstretched and said, "Come, Suzy, come here; c'mon, you can do it!"

Did you notice that verb form? It was imperative, the form of a commandment: "Come!" But how did dad's voice *sound* to Suzy when she *heard* it? Like a commandment, an order, an injunction to obey, or else? No way. What it sounded like, and what she heard, was a gracious tender invitation—and more than that. What she heard in that loving voice was the strong assurance that she really had the strength and power to do what she never realized she could do. And so she "obeyed." Empowered by the love she could hear in her father's voice, she tottered forward into his arms. She learned how to walk.

And what about us? What do we hear when we read in the Holy Scriptures those exhortations and imperatives to *do* thus and so, to *be* this or that? On what wavelength do we tune in? Do we hear Law or Gospel? As the sheep and lambs whom the Good Shepherd has called by name in our Baptism, surely we hear only Gospel, only the tender and loving voice of God, letting us know again and again what wonderful things His forgiveness for Jesus' sake now enables and empowers us to do.