

When Disobedience to Man Is Obedience to God

Acts 4:13-22

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When is obedience to man disobedience to God? And when is disobedience to man obedience to God?

The apostles, Peter and John, faced those very questions as they stood before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Acts 4. And God's people before the apostles and since the time of the apostles have faced the fiery furnace or the lion's den over such questions.

When man's commands clash with God's commands, when man's will strikes at God's will, the issue at stake is the authority of man vs. the authority of God. Whose authority is supreme?

Take for example the clash of commands between King Nebuchadnezzar and Almighty God in Daniel 3. King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold (likely of himself) that was about 90 ft. tall and ordered all rulers in his vast empire and all present to bow before and to worship the image. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego refused to obey the king's command because it violated God's command (**First Commandment**—Thou shalt have no other gods before me; **Second Commandment**—Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image/Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them). These young men were threatened by the king with being burnt alive in a fiery furnace (Daniel 3:15), and their response was clear and memorable (Daniel 3:17-18). The king was furious and cast the three faithful young believers bound into the fiery furnace, heated seven times hotter than normal. But rather than being instantaneously consumed, they were seen walking around in the scorching fire unhurt, unsinged, and unbound, together with the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ who had joined them to protect and commune with them. The king was so awestruck that he decreed that anyone speaking against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego shall be slain, "because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort" (Daniel 3:30).

When the command of man and the command of God stand toe to toe against one another, the command of man must vanish before the command of God—for God alone is lord of the conscience!

The words of that faithful covenanted minister, Samuel Rutherford, ring ever true:

Truth to Christ [faithfulness, loyalty to Christ—GLP] cannot be treason to Caesar . . . (*Lex Rex or The Law and the Prince*, cited from Mr. Rutherford's "Preface").

Let us turn to this epic battle in Acts 4 between the authority and commandment of man vs. the authority and commandment of God as the apostles. The main points are the following: (1) The Command to Bow the Knee to Man (Acts 4:13-18); (2) The Command to Bow the Knee to God Alone (Acts 4:19-22).

I. The Command to Bow the Knee to Man (Acts 4:13-18).

A. Whenever a command is issued and it is contrary to the command and will of God, we must understand that this is actually a command to bow the knee to man (rather than to God). There is no neutrality—we either bow the knee to God or we bow the knee to man. We either confess God's authority to be supreme or man's authority to be supreme. The apostles, Peter and John, are issued such a command from the Jewish Supreme Court.

B. As we approach our text for this Lord's Day, let us remember that Peter has just concluded his testimony to the Sanhedrin (in Acts 4:1-12) in which he makes clear that the man who was born lame and stood before them was healed by the name and power of Jesus Christ alone (whom they crucified but God raised from the dead) and that there is salvation in none other than Jesus Christ (there are not many ways to God—there is only the narrow way through the narrow gate—and that gate is Jesus, the eternal Son of God who became flesh and dwelt among us and who fulfilled all righteousness and paid the debt of sin for those chosen in Christ Jesus before the world began).

1. **First, the Sanhedrin beheld the apostles (Acts 4:13).** What did they see and hear in the apostles, Peter and John?

a. **They saw boldness of Peter and John.** The Greek word used here for “boldness” not only conveys the idea of courage, but also of a readiness to speak forth without hesitation or without subdued silence. It was almost as if they had been studying for days for this very situation and knew exactly what to say and how to deliver that message. This was precisely what Jesus had promised to the apostles while He was yet with them (Matthew 10:16-20). Peter could have panicked and said nothing. He could have watered down the truth so that it was not so direct in its message, but he didn't. What he proclaimed was a matter of life and death. Are we in any less need of boldness in our testimony for Christ (1 Peter 3:15-17)? And this is the same Greek word (boldness) that is used in Hebrews 4:16 (why are we to have boldness and a readiness to speak forth without hesitation unto God? Consider Hebrews 4:15).

b. **They perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men.** Peter had just given a classic defense of Jesus Christ and His resurrection power in healing the lame man (Acts 4:8-10), had even used Old Testament Scripture that confirmed the rejection of Jesus by the Jews (Acts 4:11; Psalm 118:22), and had concluded with powerful conviction in proclaiming they must come to God through this Jesus alone (Acts 4:12). These apostles were just Galilean fishermen. They had not attended their rabbinical schools. They had not sat at the feet of the great Gamaliel (as had Paul, who was trained in their rabbinical schools). These were mere commoners, how had they come to speak with such knowledge and skill? As I said a couple weeks ago, it is not degrees behind one's name that qualify one to minister on behalf of Christ—it is rather knowledge and conviction of the truth and faithfulness in proclaiming it and faithfulness in living it (in all areas of life).

c. **They took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.** Just as Jesus did not teach and preach like the scribes and the Pharisees in endlessly citing Rabbi so and so but rather taught and preached with authority in citing the Scripture by the conviction of the Holy Spirit that reached to the heart of man and challenged men, women, and children (Matthew 7:29), so likewise did the Apostle Peter teach and preach with that same kind of authority that comes from the power of the Spirit.

(1) Dear ones, those who are hungering and thirsting for the Word of God do not want to be entertained or to be given a self-help, feel-good pep talk about themselves. They want to be challenged. They want to be taught. They want to be fed. They want to be convicted and led to Jesus Christ as Savior and Sanctifier. You can evaluate the condition of your heart by what you want to hear from this preacher.

(2) Dear ones, do people look at your life, at the way you treat your wife/your husband, at your speech, at your conduct, at your goals in life, at your doctrine and worship, and conclude that you are one who has spent time with Jesus in His Word and in prayer?

2. **Second, the Sanhedrin beheld the lame man who was healed (Acts 4:14).**

a. Here we see the precarious peak upon which the Sanhedrin carefully balances itself. For though they want to shut down this teaching about the resurrected Christ with the strongest measures possible, they cannot do so because the man healed of his lameness was well-known and had been sitting at the entrance to the temple for many years, and there he stood before the Sanhedrin as healthy and vibrant in his legs as any of them.

b. They could not accuse the apostles of fakery or mere illusion. The man had been healed, and healed by the name and authority of the resurrected Christ (whom they had rejected and put to death).

3. Third, the Sanhedrin consulted together privately as to how to prevent the growing numbers of those who believed and taught the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:15-17).

a. It is almost humorous to hear how they try to remove themselves out of the hole that they dug, for it was these very men who put Jesus to death and had a huge stone rolled in front of the entrance, had a seal set upon the stone, and set guards around the tomb to make sure He stayed there.

b. Every precaution taken by the Sanhedrin to keep Jesus in the tomb only made the case for His resurrection even stronger. Now here are these apostles who had previously denied Christ and had run in fear when Jesus was arrested boldly defending the resurrection and miraculously healing a man lame from birth by the resurrected Jesus Christ—and they cannot deny it any of these facts. They could not deny it, but they would not receive it. Dear ones, There is no greater blindness than those who will not see the truth (Luke 16:31).

c. And to make matters worse for the Sanhedrin the report of this miraculous healing in the name of the resurrected Jesus was spreading throughout Jerusalem even as they spoke. What would the people say now if the Sanhedrin denied the miracle, suppressed it, or punished this wondrous deed? They feared there might be a huge backlash from the people. They did not care about the truth; they only cared about maintaining their power and position.

4. Fourth, the Sanhedrin prohibited the apostles from speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18).

a. Here is the unlawful command of the Jewish Sanhedrin that clashes against the commandment of Jesus Christ like opposing cymbals being forcefully brought together. Jesus Himself had commanded the apostles (and all faithful ministers afterwards) to teach all that He had commanded them (Matthew 28:19-20). Here is a ban on all public preaching and teaching.

b. Someone has said that the early church had to be commanded to be silent about Christ and His truth, whereas so much of the modern church has to be commanded to speak about Christ and His truth.

c. What unlawful commands have you or will you face as a Christian? You too will be placed in situations where you are pressured to deny Christ and His truth in order to hold a job (work on the Sabbath, sign an unlawful contract that promotes gay rights/same sex marriage) or in order to gain a promotion at work (lying for the boss), or in order to have close familial ties (by celebrating Christmas etc.), or in order to get a good grade in school (by cheating), or in order to maintain ecclesiastical fellowship within a church (when leaders authorize what is contrary to the will of Christ)?

(1) What about those secret temptations that come your way in standing for the truth of Christ or falling before the temptation of the enemy? As Christians we are constantly bombarded with temptations to compromise. Ministers are tempted to compromise the truth to keep certain members and their financial support or to avoid addressing certain issues that may be controversial. We are commanded to speak the truth at all time in love.

(2) Simony (the buying or selling of ecclesiastical privileges/offices) is very much alive today. The bribe of fame, fortune, and sex is dangled all the time in front of politicians, ministers, and owners of companies.

(3) This is simply the temptation that Satan brought to Eve in the Garden of Eden: Hath God said? Is it really so necessary or important to follow Christ in every detail? Dear ones, recognize all such temptations to compromise as bribes of the enemy, so that you are not misled or deceived. Whose will and authority is supreme in your life: God's or man's?

II. The Command to Bow the Knee to God Alone (Acts 4:19-22).

A. The apostles wisely cast before the Sanhedrin a dilemma: “Should we follow the command of God or the command of man? You judge for yourselves” (Acts 4:19). Of course, the Jewish Sanhedrin would not be so brazen in public to confess that the commandment of God should be disobeyed when it clashes with the commandment of man. And yet the apostles make it clear that this is exactly what the Sanhedrin is in reality calling them to do. The apostles in effect declared, “You judge whether you are the lord of our conscience or whether God alone is lord of our conscience.”

B. The apostles will only follow the command of Christ, whom they have seen and whom they have heard (Acts 4:20; Matthew 28:19-20).

1. This confession to bow the knee to God alone necessarily follows from the exclusivity of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). If salvation is found in Jesus alone, then His authority is greater than the authority of any man. In other words, if heaven and hell are under the authority of Jesus Christ, then He is superior to any authority on earth (Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:20-22). Likewise, if all judgment is committed to Jesus Christ (as He states that it is in John 5:22), then your conscience and mine (and everyone else’s) is under the authority of the Son.

2. Dear ones, we are bound to obey God, and not any creature (**including our own conscience** when it leads us from obedience to God’s Moral Law). Our conscience is only faithful when it is judging according to God’s Law. “I don’t feel convicted” in the face of truth is self-deception.

a. Whenever ministers and elders authorize in worship acts that are not warranted by God in Scripture (whether the use of uninspired hymns, or the use of musical instruments, or the celebration of holy days that have not been instituted as holy days by God in the Bible), these ministers and elders are acting as lords of the conscience over the people; for there is no Divine warrant for such acts of worship in the New Covenant worship authorized by Christ, the Head of the Church.

b. Dear ones, Christian liberty is not the freedom to believe whatever one wants to believe or to do whatever one wants to do. That is not freedom—that is bondage. Christian liberty is the freedom to trust Christ and to love and obey Christ in all of His moral commandments. Political theories abound to the effect that religious liberty or religious freedom to practice whatever religion you sincerely hold are divine rights given to us by God; for religious matters are regulated by the individual conscience of every man, woman, and child.

c. Dear ones, it is not the conscience that is lord over God, but rather it is God (and His law) that is lord over the conscience. Yes, even the **First Amendment** (the so-called right to freedom of religion) must bow to the **First Commandment** (Thou shalt have no other gods before me). Man’s law must bow to God’s Law.

d. Here is a question: Why is the individual conscience of every man the final judge in matters of religion but not the final judge in matters of murder, theft, rape, and lying? Why are the first four commandments subject to the conscience of every man, but not the last six commandments? This is purely arbitrary and once again makes man’s conscience of greater authority than God’s Law. If the conscience of every man is bound by these commands of God (“Thou shalt not kill/murder” or “Thou shalt not commit adultery”, or “Thou shalt not steal”), why is not the conscience of every man also bound by these commands of God (“Thou shalt have no other gods before me” or “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image and bow down to it” or “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain” or “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy”)? Why do we have laws on books which determine what is murder and what is not murder, what is theft and what is not theft, but not what is blasphemy, false religion, and idolatry (those are left to the conscience of every man)? Dear ones, all such political theories make man’s individual conscience a god in being superior in authority over God and His Law.

C. The apostles are threatened and released (Acts 4:21-22). If the Jewish Sanhedrin had been faithful, it would have been willing to suffer the consequences from the people for doing what was right, but the Sanhedrin cared more about their position and status than they did about obeying God. They feared the people more than they feared God.

There was a time in Scotland when many faithful ministers literally ran for the lives (the “killing times”—1666-1688). They had been removed from their pulpits and forbidden to preach in gathered assemblies because they would not bend the knee to Charles II and James II and preach and worship as these wicked kings dictated. **Carrots were dangled** in front of them by way of indulgences (bribes) to receive back their ministries, homes, and incomes. Many did so. A few (very few) refused to do so and were faithful to death. **They were called field preachers** for they preached at conventicles (gatherings) in fields, valleys, barns, and homes because they would not (like the apostles) bow the knee to the demands of the king. **Death warrants with prices on their heads** were issued—Richard Cameron, Donald Cargill, and James Renwick were eventually all killed. **For those assisting these field preachers in any way or attending upon their preaching** heavy fines, imprisonment, destruction of property, slavery, and even death were shamelessly issued.

Dear ones, there is a cost for taking a stand as did the apostles in Acts 4 and as did the faithful witnesses of Christ who would not bend the knee to civil or ecclesiastical tyranny and bribes (like tax exempt status by way of incorporation with the state—Erastianism). Caesar or Christ? Pope or Christ? Man’s authority or God’s authority. Man’s conscience or God’s Law? This is the issue at stake.

For those who are faithful to death, there is a sure and certain reward (a crown) that the Lord will bestow upon you on that final day, and then you will cast that crown at the feet of Jesus, acknowledging that it was Him and Him alone that caused you to stand by His marvelous grace. Amen.

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