

## The Obedience of Love

# THE OBEDIENCE OF LOVE

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What is real biblical love? How is it manifested?

The answer to these questions is sorely needed today. God's people are being given the impression by some Christian leaders that all doctrinal controversy, rebuke of error, and unflinching obedience to the scriptural doctrine of separation is unkind and ungracious. Pious positivism is being equated with genuine, godly love.

Did Athanasius, the early church leader, demonstrate Christian love when he stubbornly contested for the doctrine of the true deity of Christ? Did love motivate Martin Luther when he fought for doctrinal purity against the ecclesiastical powers of his day? Did John Wesley evidence love when he chose to preach on a graveyard tombstone rather than conform to the dictates of men? Was J. Gresham Machen filled with love when he lifted his powerful pen and voice against the spreading apostasy within the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.?

The modern notion of love that is prevalent in some evangelical circles today would brand all of these men as disrupters of the peace, strangers to genuine love for the brethren. It is no longer considered fashionable to contend sharply for the faith or to insist upon a clear-cut doctrinal position. It is considered bad taste to challenge error, to call attention to false teaching, or rebuke brethren who are drifting from their doctrinal moorings.

One great man has sounded a warning on this very subject. Vance Havner, writing on "The Forgotten Anathema," said: "Some Christians who once championed sound doctrine beat a retreat once in a while and from stratospheric heights announce that they do not 'stoop to controversy.' When a man contends for the faith in New Testament style he does not stoop! . . . Contending for the

faith is not easy. It is not pleasant business. It has many perils. It is a thankless job. And it is highly unpopular in this age of moral fogs and spiritual twilights. It is a day of diplomats, not prophets. It is nicer to be an appeaser than an opposer. It is the day of Erasmus, not Luther; of Gamaliel, not Paul” (*Sword of the Lord*, Jan. 7, 1955).

An examination of Scripture will reveal that divine love is strong and virile, not weak and sentimental.

## THE OBEDIENCE OF LOVE

One of the clearest illustrations of God’s demand for obedience is found in I Samuel 15:1-23. Four things stand out in this passage: (1) a clear command (v. 3), (2) a definite disobedience (vv. 8-9), (3) an attempted cover-up (vv. 14-15), and (4) a divine lesson (v. 22).

**The Problem of Disobedience.** Saul was commanded to kill all the Amalekites. Perhaps as he was sharpening his sword, one of his aids said to him: “Now, your majesty, this seems like an atrocious act. After all, you don’t manifest much love by killing people. You can’t possibly hope to win your enemies over to your side by treating them this way. Perhaps if you give Agag more civil treatment, he will become your ally instead of your enemy.” And so Saul, weakling that he was, chose to disobey God in an effort to exercise love and kindness.

Samuel the prophet was not impressed with Saul’s action. But Saul had a ready excuse when the prophet appeared upon the scene and enquired as to the reason for his disobedience. “But Samuel, you don’t understand,” he remonstrated, “I have kept these sheep and oxen alive in order to sacrifice them to God. I disobeyed God so that I could honor Him in worship. I love God even though I disobeyed the command.” Much the same paltry excuse is being given today by some Christians. They are deliberately disobeying God’s Word on the pretext of promoting God’s work.

Years ago my baby daughter came into my study. She pulled a commentary from the shelf and began to turn the pages. As I left the room, I warned her not to tear the book. As I was returning a few minutes later, my ears caught the tell-tale sound while I was still in the hall—rip, rip, rip. When I rounded the corner, Dawn lifted her big brown eyes in a twinkling smile and said, “Daddy, I love you!” Needless to say, the expression of love did her no good. She had disobeyed, and she had to take the consequences. Love that disobeys is not true love. Spiritual efforts conducted by methods contrary to God’s Word cannot be justified by loud professions of love for God or for other Christian brethren.

**The Blessing of Obedience.** One old commentator has declared: “All sentimental talking and singing about love is vain, unless by grace, we show a truthful obedience, the profession of affection is worse than affectation. Love is practical, or it is not love at all.”

The expression of godly love for Christ is found in obedience to Christ. Our Lord made this very clear in John 14:15, when He said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” Again in verse twenty-one it is recorded, “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me . . . .” In verse twenty-three He further emphasizes thus: “If a man love me, he will keep my words . . . .”

The warning of Christ against the unequal yoke of believers and unbelievers is clear in Scripture. Any attempt to circumvent this command under the guise of Christian love simply reveals an ignorance of divine revelation. “Love to Him that does not keep His commandments is either spurious or dangerously feeble,” states Alexander MacLaren.

**Steadfast Obedience.** John, the apostle of love, is also the apostle of obedience. Love and obedience complement one another. “And this is love, that we walk after his commandments” (II John 6). In this statement is presented the steadfastness and the sole allegiance of love. A better rendering would be “keep on walking

according to his commandments.” Continued obedience is stressed. Love is characterized by continued, faithful, dogged, determined, unwavering obedience to all the commands of Christ. Many servants of God have begun valiantly to obey the Lord, but the pressures of friendships, ecclesiastical loyalties, majority opinions, and financial securities have turned them aside from the path of obedience.

A number of years ago a Bible teacher, now widely known, was asked to participate in a service which would be held in an evangelical church, but in which liberals would also participate. In a letter to a friend, he said in part as follows: “I cannot afford to be publically associated on any platform with men of this sort. These men do not believe the things we believe. They do not preach the gospel we are standing for here at \_\_\_\_\_. They are not holding up Jesus Christ as the only Savior from sin and the only begotten Son of God. I know the pastor of the church where these meetings are to be held is a true believer . . . , but the presence of men who are liberals makes it impossible for me to accept the invitation.” In his earlier years he took a strong stand against cooperation with modernists. In a speech in his later years, this same man repudiated the very principle he had previously nobly espoused. He told his audience in heated words that it was all right for fundamentalists to cooperate with liberals as long as they did not compromise their message. This man started well, but mounting pressures caused him to fail to “keep on walking according to his commandments.”

**Sole Obedience.** Notice again a second emphasis in II John, verse six: “And this is love, that we walk *after his commandments.*” Love’s allegiance is solely to the Divine Commander. Love does not vary its walk according to the pattern of others, according to the shifting opinions of fellow Christians, or according to the changing theological climates of its day. Love is occupied with “His commandments”—nothing else.

On a cold, bitter, wintry night in New York City, a commuter train conductor was receiving tickets at the gate. In the line of duty he

had to stop the rushing passengers and demand their tickets. This meant taking off warm gloves and exposing his hands to the cold, biting wind, a process calculated to sharpen tempers and tongues. Several uncomplimentary remarks were hurled at the conductor. Seeing his plight, a friend remarked, “You’re not a very popular man tonight are you?” The conductor smiled, pointed to the lighted windows of the general offices of the railroad, and replied, “I only want to be popular up there.”

Obedience to orders—not crowds, fame, or apparent success—makes a man of God “popular up there.”

### THE ORTHODOXY OF LOVE

Love is obedient, but love is also orthodox. A noted preacher has made the statement (which has been widely circulated) that “the badge of Christian discipleship is not orthodoxy, but love.” The impression is given by this statement that Christian love is something superior to and apart from orthodoxy, that love is practically oblivious to doctrinal issues. One writer has correctly diagnosed this present trend as a “tendency in current evangelicalism to bypass specifics in theology.” Insistence upon adherence to clear theological distinctions is labeled as “narrow,” “divisive,” “intolerant,” and “bigoted.”

**Love Rejoices in the Truth.** Modern “evangelicalism” (as the term is used by many) encourages a love apart from the truth. On the other hand, the Bible unites love and truth. Love springs from truth and centers around the truth as revealed in an infallible Book. Love “rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). There is some disagreement among commentators as to whether “the truth” in this text refers to moral righteousness or to the truth of the Gospel. While the primary application is very likely to moral truth, the presence of the definite article might also point to an inclusion of doctrinal truth—the truth of the Gospel.

Charles Hodge says concerning the verse, “The general sentiment of this verse is that love does not sympathize with evil, but with

good.” Love does not countenance error, even though it may be accompanied by a measure of truth. The popular notion which holds that in an institution, evangelistic effort, or denominational program some doctrinal error can be tolerated as long as it is carefully mixed with a degree of the truth is wrong. Love “rejoiceth not in unrighteousness.” Is it not a mark of love to support programs that are evil in principle but contain some orthodoxy of message? Love is wholeheartedly, unequivocally, eternally opposed to all error whether in doctrine or practice. Love does not bless error in order to promote truth.

Paul is very clear here. “Love rejoices in the truth.” There is a definite system of theology that is called “the truth” in Scripture. It is absolute, not relative. Fundamentalists do not have to be “reexamining” the great truths of Scripture to see if they are correct. We are not seekers of the truth, but proclaimers of the truth.

Dr. H. A. Ironside was sitting in his office in the book store at Oakland, California, one day. In walked a long, gaunt figure with a flowing beard and flashing eyes. He accosted Mr. Ironside and said, “Sir, I perceive that you are a truth-seeker.” “No,” Ironside said, “as a matter of fact I’m not.” The intruder, somewhat taken aback, said, “But, sir, the presence of all these books proclaim you as a seeker after divine truth.” Holding up the Bible, Ironside replied, “Ah, sir, I am not seeking the truth; I have found it. It is all in here.” “Well, sir,” his questioner remarked, “do you know that we are living in the millennium? I happen to be one of the 144,000 and I have my resurrection body.” “What’s that?” queried Ironside. The gaunt gentleman repeated, “I have my resurrection body.” “Why,” said Ironside, “is that it you have with you?” He agreed that it was, and the noted Bible teacher replied, “Oh, I’m terribly disappointed. I expected something better.” By this time, the “truth seeker” was enraged, cursed his tormentor in the name of the Lord, and vanished through the door.

We are not “truth seekers,” searching among various theological systems to determine that which is correct. The great

fundamentals of the faith represent the truth of God as declared in His Word. Men who do not embrace these fundamentals are outside the realm of the revealed truth of God. They may be very gracious, very courteous, and very learned, but if they deny the great fundamentals of historic Christianity, they are void of the truth of God. It is not a mark of love to seek fellowship with men who openly deny the Scriptures. Love “rejoices in the truth.”

**Love Speaks the Truth.** Not only does love rejoice in the truth, but love also “speaks the truth” (Eph. 4:15). Actually, the word used here encompasses more than just the spoken word. It actually means “living the truth,” but this includes a proclamation of it.

Many believers, on the plea of maintaining love and unity, will withhold truth that needs to be spoken. They fear lest they will lose a friendship of brethren or cause division in the ranks. There comes a time, however, when godly men must speak the truth, kindly but firmly, accurately, and sometimes publicly.

If an institution, mission board, school, or man is wrong, it is the duty of those possessing divine love to tell them so. True love is not silent while God’s people are being led astray. True love does not hold its peace in order to provide more “cooperation” and “unity.” Love shoots straight from the shoulder. If a thing is wrong, it’s wrong. If controversy is necessary, it will not be shunned.

J. Gresham Machen has forcefully written thus:

Presenting an issue sharply is indeed by no means a popular business at the present time; there are many who prefer to fight their intellectual battles in what Dr. Francis L. Patton has aptly called a “condition of low visibility.” Clear cut definition of terms in religious matters, bold facing of the logical implications of religious views, is by many persons regarded as an impious proceeding . . . Light may at times be an impertinent intruder, but it is always

beneficial in the end. The type of religion which rejoices in the pious sounds of traditional phrases, regardless of their meanings, or shrinks from “controversial” matters, will never stand amid the shocks of life (*Christianity and Liberalism*, p. 1).

**Love Maintains Biblical Orthodoxy.** Another important passage in our study of biblical love is II Timothy 1:13, which reads: “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” Paul here declares that sound doctrine is to be embraced and defended in a spirit of love. “Sound words” and “love” are inseparable. Brotherly love is limited by the boundaries of sound doctrine.

Paul places great emphasis upon the use of words—a proper theological terminology. Believers are exhorted to maintain the “form of sound words.” Wuest correctly remarks that “he is to hold to the doctrinal phraseology he received from the great apostle.” Words are very important, especially when dealing with eternal truth.

A West Coast pastor was being kidded in a ministerial meeting because of the large scab that was prominent on the end of his nose. He endeavored to explain the origin. “You see,” he said, “my wife said, ‘Shut up,’ and I thought she said, ‘Speak up.’” Words are important. Herein lies the evil of modern neo-orthodoxy, which uses terms but divorces them from their common and accepted meanings.

Unfortunately, today there are persons who are anxious to receive into full Christian fellowship those who deny basic doctrines, the “form of sound words.” Those who battle for pure doctrine, for accurate theology, and for exact, clear terminology are looked upon by some as disturbers of the peace. And yet Paul admonishes us to “hold fast”—maintain a militant, unceasing defense of the faith—but do it in faith and love. The words “faith and love” specify the principles in which the pattern is to be held, and mark “the

sphere and element to which the pattern was to be restricted” (C. J. Ellicott, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*).

Charles Eerdman comments on the text by saying, The need of such commands has never ceased. In all ages of the Church the gospel has been endangered both by false friends and by open enemies . . . . At times it must be stoutly defended; and this can best be done by those whose faith is accompanied by love . . . . Today he is calling not only his ordained ministers but also all of his followers to guard the sacred treasure of revealed truth “in faith and love.” Perhaps we are living in days when the false friends of the Gospel are more dangerous than its open enemies. Strong measures are needed, and these are in perfect harmony with the principle of love.

## THE OBSERVATION OF LOVE

Love is not only orthodox, it is also observant. Divine love enables believers not only to see the changing patterns of Christendom that constantly fluctuate before their eyes, but more than that it enables them to **observe**, to carefully inspect, and to draw conclusions about various religious phenomena with which they come in contact. Many ministers, Christian leaders, and laymen see much but observe little. Some have an idea that

“Love is blind, and lovers cannot see  
The petty follies that themselves commit.”

A far too widespread notion prevails that if Christian leaders are seriously wrong in certain aspects of their leadership, other believers should just “look the other way,” pretend the errors are not serious, make a plea for Christian love that will not criticize the brethren, and then hope the situation will clear up. Obviously, this is not practical nor scriptural.

**Love Discerns.** The prayer of Paul for the church at Philippi is that their “love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment” (Phil. 1:9). The word “judgment” would better be rendered “discernment.” The love, therefore, for which Paul prays is a love based on “accurate knowledge” and evidencing a “moral perception,” a “peculiar insight” (Cf. John Eadie’s commentary on Philippians).

Here is no sickly sentimentalism, which characterizes some expressions of love. Paul says, “Discern whether a thing is right or wrong. If it is wrong, declare it so.” Believers are to exercise loving discernment about everything. One day in conversing with a respected pastor friend, I asked him why it was that so many pastors were unable to see the issues of the hour in which we live and were following unscriptural concepts. He immediately replied, “Ernie, we have too many flat-nosed preachers!” Somewhat nonplused, I asked him what he meant by that. “Back in Leviticus 21:18,” he said, “God instructed Moses as to the requirements for the priesthood. The verse reads, ‘For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach; a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or anything superfluous.’ You see ‘flat-nosed’ men couldn’t be priests.” Still puzzled, I said, “But what do you make out of that?” He continues, “I remember what my grandmother used to do when she would bring up a jar of home-canned goods prepared months before from the cellar. After opening it, the first thing she did was to put it up to her nose and smell it to see if it was all right. The nose is the instrument of discernment. She discerned the state of the contents by a smell. People whose nose is damaged can’t discern things. The flat-nosed priest in the Old Testament is a picture of those servants of God who, while perfectly healthy in other aspects, nevertheless lack the vital spiritual capability of discernment. This is the reason many believer-priests today are not able to distinguish truth from error in the current conflicts which face us.”

**Love Rebukes.** Because divine love thus issues in sharp discernment, it is therefore necessary at times for courageous

warriors of the cross to be explicit in exposing error and those who hold it. More timid souls often suggest that this “name-calling” is divisive, harmful, and lacking in Christian charity. But is it?

In dealing with heresy, he [Paul] has the courage to name the arch-heretics and specify their error, that his brand of disapprobation may be upon them and the people may not be wondering who he means and perhaps surmising it is somebody else . . . . That is not charity, but the lack of its holy courage, which sometimes follows the opposite course and for fear of seeming narrow or intolerant will let destructive error go unchecked until “the faith of many is overthrown!” Paul proves his perfect love by rejoicing only in the truth and guarding against the wrecking of souls more than the wrecking of some popular leaders (Joseph Smith, *Pauline Perfection*, cited by Chester Tulga, *The Doctrine of Holiness in These Times*, p. 35).

Then, too, it is sometimes necessary to rebuke true servants of God who have fallen into error and are influencing other Christians their way. Divine love and sharp rebuke are not incompatible. Divine love sometimes manifests itself in sharp rebuke of the erring saint, for “whom the Lord loveth he correcteth” (Prov. 3:12). When Peter defected at Antioch, Paul “withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed” (Gal. 2:11), but he did it in love and out of concern for Peter, who later in his life praised “our beloved brother Paul” (2 Pet. 3:15). Because one Christian rebukes another Christian for some unscriptural conduct does not mean the rebuking brother lacks love for the one rebuked. Paul loved Peter even though he opposed his action at Antioch with holy vehemence. One expositor has succinctly stated:

In our own day there is danger of mistaking lazy or weak indifference for Christian charity. It is convenient doctrine that the beliefs of our fellow-

Christians are no concern of ours, even when they try to propagate what contradicts the creed. And, while emphasis is laid upon the responsibility of accepting articles of faith, it is assumed that there is little or no responsibility in refusing to accept, or in teaching others to refuse also. To plead for tenderness, where severity is needed, is not charity, but Laodicean lukewarmness; and mistaken tenderness may easily end up in making us “partakers in evil works” (Alfred Plummer, *The Expositor’s Bible*, “The Pastoral Epistles,” p. 305).

### CONCLUSION

These are days when some men, long respected in orthodox Christian circles, are veering away from a straight course in the Word of God. A sustained effort is being made to remove the sharp lines of distinction between fundamentalism and liberalism in order to draw them together in an unholy alliance. May our God raise up unflinching “Pauls” who will withstand such men to the face with a consuming love for Christ and the erring brethren and with undaunted loyalty to the truth of God.

Godly love is obedient to the clear prohibitions of Scripture that forbid an unequal yoke with heretics, infidels, and unbelievers. Godly love is loyal to the orthodox Christian faith. Godly love is observant, exercising discernment toward the issues it faces. This is the love which is so desperately needed today.

**“Moreover the semblance of love which does not maintain the truth, but accommodates itself to that which is not the truth, is not love according to God. It is the taking advantage of the name of love in order to help on the seductions of Satan. In the last days the test of true love is the maintenance of the truth. God would have us love one another; but the Holy Ghost, by whose power we receive this divine nature, and who pours the love of God into our hearts is the Spirit of truth; and His office is to glorify Christ. Therefore it is impossible that a love which can put up with a doctrine that falsifies Christ, and which is indifferent to it, can be of the Holy Ghost, still less so, if such indifference be set up as the proof of that love”** (*Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. V, pp. 357-58).

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