

What Is True Obedience?

By Chris Yokel

*"Freed from the law, O blessed condition
We can sin all we want and still have remission!"*

*"Don't smoke, don't drink, don't chew,
and don't go out with girls who do."*

What does it mean to obey Jesus Christ, and what role does obedience play in the Christian life? The church has debated these questions ever since its inception two millennia ago. The apostles and early church leaders dealt, on the one hand, with the Judaizers, Jewish-Christians who were convinced that Gentile-Christians also needed to submit to circumcision and the rigors of the Mosaic law in order to be full-fledged members of God's covenant people. On the other hand, they had to grapple with the multi-headed monster of Gnosticism, a huge influence upon the early church, which in some instances led to licentious living¹, and in other instances led to a harsh asceticism².

Since then, the church has garnered for itself quite a mixed bag of monasticism, antinomianism, and fundamentalism, along with a whole host of other "isms" that posit various positions on obedience. I however, would like to focus on two opposing trends that I see often today, and then I would like to offer a middle position of, I hope, biblical balance. This is especially important for Covenant of Christ Ministries, and the message we are trying to promulgate, which some would look upon as a radical call to works-righteousness. For it must also be noted that, hanging over Protestantism today is the specter of Catholic "works", which have become a taboo within evangelical culture. Anything at all appearing to approach these "works" is condemned as "adding to the work of Christ" and "denying grace." I hope to clarify some of those issues. Overall, I wish to warn the licentious on one hand, and the zealous on the other, as well as reason with the doubters.

Christianity Without Costs

In his classic yet challenging work *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed that, "The word of cheap grace has been the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works."³ This cheap grace that Bonhoeffer describes is "grace sold in the market, like cheapjacks' wares. The sacrament, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing....Cheap grace means the justification of the sin without the

1 Brown, David. "Christian' Gnosticism Examined" *Logos Resource Pages*. 2010.

<<http://www.logosresourcepages.org/Believers/gnosticism.htm>, retrieved November 21, 2010>, "It is likely that Carpocrates was the founder of the 'Christian' Gnostics in the first half of the second century A.D. The earliest and most vivid account of the Carpocratians can be found in Irenaeus (130-202 A.D.) work titled *Against Heresy*. They did not believe Jesus was divine. His followers did not believe they had to follow the Law of Moses or any morality. They were very licentious (immoral) in their behavior."

2 Johnston, William. *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000, pg. 536, "Although the early Church characterized some Gnostics as hedonists and antinomians, those positions were more the exception than the rule. Instead, to the extent that they subscribed to a body-soul dualism, Gnostics tended to favor asceticism."

3 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Touchstone, 1995. pg. 55.

justification of the sinner.”⁴ Cheap grace is represented by the first ditty at the beginning of this article — that through Christ's death we have been freed from all obligation. The “law” was of the Old Testament, but “grace” is of the New Testament, under whose bright sunshine we are showered with God's unconditional love. Walk the aisle, pray the prayer, and you are delivered, and nothing that happens from here on out will ever change that. For example, consider this article from *Starting With God*, a website created by the popular evangelism ministry Campus Crusade. This article, “God's Unique Love,” talks about the kind of love that God has for you now that you've become a Christian: “He does not love you based on your performance. There is nothing you can do to cause God to love you more than He already does— and there is nothing that will cause God to love you any less. He loves you, even more than you love yourself.”⁵ In another article from the site, “Will This Last?”, we read: “This relationship [with God] is protected, not by what we do, but because of God's character and Jesus' death on our behalf. Jesus purchased our relationship with Him, canceling the penalty of sin that stood between us and God. And so we become His child, forgiven, indwelt by Him, declared righteous in His eyes, because Jesus covers our sin. Unfortunately, we will still sin. We still find ourselves choosing to do things our way instead of God's way. But this does not change the security of our relationship with Christ.”⁶

Taking these two passages together, a strange logic emerges. We are told that God's love is unconditional, and that nothing we do can cause God to love us more. The implication from the first passage is also that nothing we do can cause God to love us any less. Even sin? In the second passage, our propensity to sin even after becoming Christians is acknowledged as “unfortunate,” but nevertheless it does not “change the security of our relationship with Christ.” This line of thinking leads to situations such as the one my pastor found himself in when he was a new Christian in Colorado. He had been led to Jesus by, appropriately enough, Campus Crusade. Hearing this exact kind of logic of God's unconditional love expressed by one of the Campus Crusade ministers, he proceeded to ask a number of questions about types of sins, and whether he could do them and still be a Christian. The minister affirmed that he could commit every one and still be Christian, even to the point of acknowledging that he could commit adultery and still be saved.

It might be argued that this example is an extreme one, and that no reasonable Christian would ever consider this to be acceptable. But I have had enough experience around “reasonable” Christians-- who may date or marry unbelievers (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14), get drunk (Ephesians 5:18), engage in unmarried sex (Ephesians 5:5), and practice filthy language (Ephesians 5:4) without considering these things to be problems— to know that such an attitude about obedience is more pervasive than imagined in the church today. After all, nothing they do can make God love them less, so why not get away with a little sin here and there? Obedience is for the really serious Christian, and may be desired, but is essentially optional.

This position embraces Paul's “we hold that one is justified by faith part from the works of the law”⁷ in an unqualified and unthinking manner. It maintains that Christ's work upon the cross has released us to total freedom and non-obligation.

4 Bonhoeffer, 43.

5 Pogue, Steven. “God's Unique Love” *Starting With God*. <<http://www.startingwithgod.com/new-life/gods-love/>, retrieved November 21, 2010>.

6 “Will This Last?” *Starting With God*. <<http://www.startingwithgod.com/new-life/will-this-last/>, retrieved November 21, 2010>.

7 Romans 3:28

This position, as Bonhoeffer observed, is a dangerous poison to the church, and has been the downfall of many a one-time believer. There are several ways it can be refuted from Scripture. First of all, what was the intended purpose of the new covenant? It is highlighted clearly in Jeremiah 31, and in Ezekiel 36. In Jeremiah, speaking of the new covenant, God says through the prophet, “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel in those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (31:33). And through Ezekiel, speaking again of the new covenant God says, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules...And I will deliver you from all uncleanness” (36:26-27, 29). The point here is that God's purpose in the new covenant was not to free Christians *from* the demands of the law, but to free them *in order to follow after* the demands of the law.

Paul echoes this theme of continued but empowered obligation in his letters. Many Christians like to emphasize the idea that we have been freed from slavery to sin, and it is true that we have been. But this release has not been into a state of autonomy. Rather, we have been released from one slavery only to be bound into another— slavery to Christ. Christ did not so much emancipate us as purchase us for Himself. As Paul says in Romans 6:15-18, “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” Similarly, in admonishing Christians to avoid sexual immorality, he says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

The blunt fact is that what we do as Christians does matter to God, because He is our master, and has purchased us out of sin and death for His service. It is a service of life, and joy, and peace, but a service nonetheless. And it is a service that counts for something; God will not tolerate a life of disobedience from those who claim His name: “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them; for at one time you were also darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:5-8). “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:12-13). God will punish and condemn those who practice sin, and yet still claim Christ as their freedom.

“Radical” Christianity

On the other side of the coin is a position I'd like to call “radical” Christianity. This manifests itself in several ways. One is Pharisaism. Now, some clarification should be offered in terms of what I mean by this phrase, because to be called a “Pharisee” or a “legalist” is an abused term in Christian circles. Often it is used when a Christian with a legitimate holiness concern is challenging a fellow Christian, who doesn't like how he or she is being challenged in terms of their walk with Christ. An easy out is often the accusation, “Don't be a Pharisee!” or, “You're such a legalist!” In this instance, it is a misappropriation of the term. The Pharisees weren't bad because they believed in obeying God.

The problem was how they went about doing this. First of all, the Pharisees often followed the traditions handed down to them *regarding the law*, rather than the law itself. Jesus accused them of this in Mark 7:9 when He said, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” This was in regard to the Pharisees challenging Jesus on why His disciples did not wash their hands before eating. Mark notes, “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches” (7:3-4). Notice here the emphasis on tradition, and the tradition of the elders. Nowhere in the Mosaic law, within the Pentateuch, will you find commands given by God related to the kinds of washings and cleanings described here. There are commands regarding washing and cleansing, but mostly for priests, and for certain people who had become unclean by touching dead bodies and the like. The Pharisees had let their zeal, and their own perception of righteousness, outstrip God's own assessment of righteousness. Furthermore, they were imposing these extra burdens upon other people (Matthew 23:4). Along with this, Jesus accused them of performing their works before men to be seen and praised by them, not by God.

Modern Pharisees operate in the same way. Again, it is not that they argue that we must obey God, but their offense is the way in which they argue that we should obey God. Such people might argue that it is a sin to drink alcohol. But the Bible nowhere makes this argument. Jesus acknowledged that He ate and drank, and was accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard” which implies he drank alcoholic wine (Matthew 11:19). He Himself, in His first miracle, blessed the wedding of Cana with six stone jars full of wine, and the circumstances of the passage indicate that it was alcoholic (John 2:1-11). The Bible does indeed warn against getting drunk, and in Proverbs even cautions kings and rulers about drinking, because they are in the place of critical decision making. But in other places it praises wine as a good creation of God. Psalm 104, which is full of praise to the Creator God, says, “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart” (14-15).

Modern Pharisees might argue that it is a sin to own a television, or to listen to anything but Christian music, or to play competitive games. Now, none of these things, held as a conviction, is wrong in and of itself. It is when someone says any of these things is a sin for *all Christians*, and looks down on any fellow believers erring in these ways, that Pharisaism rises up as a sin in itself. Ironically, many such people, in their supposed zeal for God's righteousness, end up breaking many of the real commandments that God gives regarding fellowship, love, and grace among believers. They often develop an attitude of considering themselves, and anyone else who holds to their narrow set of views, as being the “truly righteous,” while the majority of churches are riddled with compromise. Some of them withdraw from fellowship with any established church, and this only serves to further their narrow views because they have nobody to challenge their mindset or their interpretation of Scripture. Thus they are increasingly confirmed in their own “true righteousness,” and the opposing “compromise” of most other churches.

Of course, this kind of extreme isolation is not always the case. The American fundamentalism of the early 1900s demonstrated forms of narrow-minded conviction on a broader scale, as exemplified in the second little ditty at the beginning of this article.⁸ As can be discerned from it, the Christian

⁸ In saying “narrow-minded,” I am not referring to fundamentalist convictions regarding the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the inerrancy of Scripture, etc, but more to the cultural and behavioral practices that typified the era.

cultural zeitgeist of the era was more about what Christians *didn't* do, and again focused on hard-line convictions in gray areas like movies, parties, dancing, alcohol, and smoking.⁹

For those holding to the Scriptures contained in the 66 books of the Bible as being the ultimate authority for Christians, many of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church would constitute another form of Pharisaism. Again, the problem is not that Catholics hold a high view of obedience or righteous works, but what kind of works they advocate. Saying so many Our Fathers or Hail Marys for penance cannot be found to be a Scripturally-based practice. There are many other such practices of obedience demanded by the Catholic church that operate in the same way that the practices of the Pharisees in Jesus' day did—they are extra-biblical commandments added on top of God's original commands. They are traditions of men raised to the level of Scripture itself.

All such attempts are equally poisonous to true obedience, because they obscure the truth of what God requires with the thoughts and ideas of what men think of as better than God's righteous rules.

There is another major form of “radical” Christianity that is more philosophically based. As I mentioned earlier, Gnosticism was an early foe of Christianity that threatened to infect the church with its admixture of mysticism and Platonic ideas. It did manage to do so somewhat, and one of the results of this was the monastic movement. Monasticism borrowed its underlying basis for existence and practice from Gnosticism, Platonism, and neo-Platonism. Plato was, of course, the most famous philosopher to ever live. He believed that the whole of existence is composed of two levels of reality. There is the physical, tangible reality in which we live by our senses. But higher and more ultimate is the realm of Ideas. Plato considered this to be the true reality. Everything in the physical world that we experience is an imperfect copy of an Idea. This division of two realities made Plato a dualist. He believed that man also has this dualism within himself. Plato taught that the soul has come from the realm of Ideas, and will return to it someday. Upon entering a human body, the soul forgets the perfection of the Idea realm, being trapped in the limiting and debased sensory experience of humanity. Man's goal is to push through the cloud and distraction of his earthly senses in order to grasp the true nature of the Ideas.¹⁰

Platonism itself went on to influence neo-Platonism, which gave the philosophy a mystical twist, positing a monistic¹¹ universe in which everything emanates from God, with pure spirit at the top

9 I'm not saying that you should go buy a pack of Marlboros and light up in the name of Jesus. What I am saying is that these areas are ones for discernment and differing views among Christians. There are some general principles that *all* Christians should hold to in exercising this discernment, which will be discussed later in the article.

10 Plato. “Phaedo”. *From Plato to Derrida*. New Jersey: Prentice, “The lovers of knowledge know that when philosophy receives the soul, she is fast bound in the body, and fastened to it; she is unable to contemplate what is, by herself, or except through the bars of her prison house, the body; and she is wallowing in utter ignorance. And philosophy sees that the dreadful thing about the imprisonment of the body is that it is caused by lust, and that the captive herself is an accomplice in her own captivity. The lovers of knowledge, I repeat, know that philosophy takes the soul when she is in this condition, and gently encourages her, and strives to release her from her captivity, showing her that the perceptions of the eye, and the ear, and the other senses are full of deceit, and persuading her to stand aloof from the senses and to use them only when she must, and exhorting her to rally and gather herself together, and to trust only to herself and to the real existence which she of her own self apprehends, and to believe that nothing which is subject to change, and which she perceives by other faculties, has any truth, for such things are visible and sensible, while what she herself sees is apprehended by reason and invisible. The soul of the true philosopher thinks that it would be wrong to resist this deliverance from captivity [by death], and therefore she holds aloof, so far as she can, from pleasure, and desire, and pain, and fear” (54-55)

11 Monism posits that everything in the universe is one.

and pure matter at the bottom. Man's goal is to push his soul back up this metaphysical ladder to God. Gnosticism also believed in this kind of metaphysical ladder, but the way up was through obtaining more and more secret knowledge at each level. Manicheanism was another view which argued that salvation was brought about through the liberation of the soul from the body. All of these views tended to advocate a severe asceticism, since the bodily senses were deceptive, and distracted the soul from its goal of obtaining pure divine bliss.

The monastic movement built off of Platonism and all these other manifestations of it. The monastic life was seen as higher and more spiritual than the life of the average Christian at the time. And what did monks often do, especially in the strictest orders? They flagellated themselves, they prayed all night lying face down on cold stone floors, they took vows of celibacy and poverty, they sometimes took vows of silence for years on end, and they fasted for long periods of time. Granted, some orders were much more lenient, and at certain times in history, monks were hardly known for chastity or asceticism. But the whole goal of the monastic movement was essentially Platonistic, with a Christian twist— deny and despise the flesh so that the soul could reach for God.

While monasticism is hardly as prevalent today as it used to be earlier in history, there is still a spirit of monasticism that pervades parts of the church, and certain Christians. For these believers, the most important things in life are prayer, Bible reading, and meditation. Anything else is a frivolous distraction or a necessary evil. How can you be watching football, or going to movies, or reading literature, when there are hours that could be spent in constant prayer or memorizing Scripture! Even work is sometimes considered a necessary evil by such people. Culture is of very little or no use to such Christians, because they are busy preparing their souls for the heavenly kingdom, in which they will float about on clouds, glad to be rid of their stinking flesh forever.

In this scheme, the “best” vocations are ministry vocations. You should be a pastor, or a missionary, or involved in some kind of para-church work that somehow ties into saving more souls from their horrid bodies. God forbid if you are an artist, or a musician, or a writer— unless of course you are always painting pictures of Jesus, or always writing songs about Jesus, or always writing books about Jesus, then your vocation is acceptable.

Like Pharisees, Christians who have a monastic mindset are often tempted to look down on other Christians as worldly and carnal if they aren't always occupied in “spiritual” matters. They can also tend to isolate themselves (just like monks did in their cells), or else cloister in their monastic-like communities. And like Pharisees, they can often become guilty of breaking some of the very commands to fellowship, love, and charity in their zeal for holiness and purity.

The Biblical Balance

Between these two extremes lies a biblical balance. What is it, and what does biblical obedience look like?

Obedience is following what Jesus and the apostles said. The first thing about true obedience is that it involves following what Jesus and the apostles said. Jesus gave many commandments, such as those spoken in the Sermon on the Mount, which outlined the ethics of the Kingdom. The apostles followed suit in their letters, speaking as Christ's representatives, and commanding the church to act in certain ways. Most of the things they commanded were very clear. Others were left somewhat gray and not so clear. For instance, Paul allowed for early Christian disagreement on eating meat offered to

idols. There are areas of obedience where he understands that “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5). In such gray areas, or areas of conscience, the foundation is still Scripture and working off of principles in Scripture, and the practice among believers should be charity. Paul has no patience, however, for those who seek to impose extra-biblical requirements upon believers: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in question of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath....Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about vision, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used)— according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Colossians 2:16, 18-23).

There are enough commandments given to us by Christ and the apostles as it is. Any attempt to impose additional man-made requirements upon believers, or to draw a hard line in the sand where the New Testament does not, becomes the burden of the Pharisees described by Jesus, and proclaims that man's ideas about righteousness are more important than God's.

Obedience is necessary. This is the rather unique and important point that we are contending for at Covenant of Christ Ministries, which is that the obedience that Jesus and the apostles call for is a necessary obedience. Not merely “necessary to prove that the faith you once received is real,” but necessary for future justification. Jesus told His followers, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments....Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me” (John 14:15,21). It is by keeping His commandments that we abide in Him and His love (John 15:9-10). The apostle John also reiterates this in his first letter when he says: “Whoever says he abides in him [Jesus] ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (2:6). Paul beat his body to bring it under the self-control of obedience, so that after he had preached to others, he himself would not be disqualified from the race of the Christian life. And what is the prize of this race? Eternal life. Elsewhere, Paul says he strives, “that by any means possible I may attain to the resurrection of the dead. Not that I have already obtained, or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:11-14). I will not belabor a point which has been made many times elsewhere by our ministry, but only to say that the obedience that Christ call us to is strictly obedience to His commands, and to teachings of the apostles.

Obedience is creation embracing. True biblical obedience is anti-Platonic in the strongest way possible. We are not called to hyper-spiritual, world-denying obedience to the point where we can sit on poles¹² or lay on beds of nails. The obedience commanded in the Bible is often quite earthy and pedestrian. For example, when people asked John the Baptist what they should do once they had received the baptism of repentance, the things he said were very simple. He basically told them to share their extra clothes with those who had none (Luke 3:10). He told tax collectors not to extort people for more than they owed. He told soldiers not to abuse their power, and to be happy with what they earned. He did not tell any of them to drop their current professions and go live in a cave by the Dead Sea, where they could pray and read the Scriptures all the time. Paul told the Thessalonians in

12 Knight, Kevin. “St. Simeon Stylite the Elder”. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2009.

<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13795a.htm>, retrieved November 22, 2010>.

his first letter to them, “Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (4:11-12). Many of the apostolic letters are filled with very practical commands to obedience, relating to masters and slaves, husbands and wives, and parents and children. Why have we as Christians through history so often felt the need to add to these? Perhaps because they aren't all that glamorous? No will probably look at a father who faithfully parents his kids, loves his wife, and provides for his family as a “hero of the faith” or a “Christian superstar.” But someday God will say to Him, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Now, all of this is not to say that obedience is not sometimes hard, very hard. This is not to say that we will never be faced with extreme situations as Christians where an amazing amount of spiritual strength will be required. It is to say that God is not calling all of us to walk around floating several inches above the ground, oh so much more holy than this earthly existence.

When it comes to creation, Jesus and the apostles delighted in it. Jesus Himself honored the material world by uniting the spiritual and the material in His own incarnated existence, which He continues even now as the God-Man. As mentioned already, Jesus ate and drank, celebrating weddings and good times with people. It's not as if these things were beneath Him, or not worth His precious holy time. He embraced the world He had made, and came to save it, not toss it aside like trash. To bring up Paul again, in 1 Timothy he condemns the ascetics within the church and affirms the goodness of creation when he says, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (4:1-5). How ironic that Paul says those who advocate asceticism follow the doctrines of demons, when those Christians today who are ascetics would call the “worldiness” of fellow believers demonic.

Obedience is discerning. With the freedom given to us to celebrate and enjoy creation comes the responsibility to use it wisely. “All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be enslaved by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). It is true that the good things of God's creation can become our idols, and we can become enslaved to them. But the answer is not to cut these things off and require other Christians to do so. The answer is to practice discernment and balance. I think that many Christians are overwhelmed by the responsibility of having to practice discernment, which can be difficult and tricky, and at times requires a lot of work. They would rather have everything all drawn out black and white. So what they do is retreat into asceticism, staying away from the good things God has made rather than even be tempted. Or they retreat in Pharisaism, creating all kinds of rules in order to justify their choices, without having to exercise wisdom. Condemn alcohol, rather than enjoying it in moderation. Condemn television and films, rather than discerning how this technology might be used for education, enjoyment, and edification. Condemn secular music, rather than recognizing that the Spirit gives gifts to all men, which we can appreciate and enjoy without necessarily accepting everything offered. After all, Philippians 4:8 says “*Whatever* is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is an excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” It does not say, “only the things that are 'Christian,’” it says “whatever.” There are things in the world and in creation that are worthy of praise and admiration, because ultimately we know that God is Creator overall.

Obedience is not impossible. Putting aside the finely-tuned practices of Pharisaism, the hyper-

spiritualism of monasticism, and the Platonic ideas of perfect, unstained, unspotted essences, we can begin to see how obedience is not an impossible thing. These ideas are what cause some Christians today to argue that we can never really obey God because all our actions are tainted, or that we can never follow the commands in the Sermon on the Mount because they are just too impossibly high. Well, God obviously has a different opinion of the matter, because there are many people throughout biblical history that He considered to have kept His commandments blamelessly, including Abraham (Genesis 26:6), Asa (1 Kings 15:11), Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:43), Jehoash (2 Kings 12:2), Jotham (2 Kings 15:34), Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:3), and Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6). If these saints of the past, who were normal people like us, were said to have obeyed God faithfully, where is our excuse?¹³ We are called to follow after God, and the examples of past believers show that this can be done.

The two extremes of licentiousness and extra-biblical spiritualism are both distortions that obscure the true nature of biblical obedience. It is of vital importance to expose these distortions so that we can get at the heart of obedience, for if we do not know what our Lord requires of us, we are lost. I hope that this article has been helpful in clarifying exactly what it means to obey Jesus as a New Testament Christian, and what exactly we at Covenant of Christ Ministries are speaking of when we talk about the necessity of obedience. We are not talking about Roman Catholic extra-biblical works. We are not talking about monastic self-punishment and self-denial. We are talking about being very much in the world, but not of the world, because our ethics come from the true King who reigns over all. We are not talking about escaping the world, but discerning between the goodness of creation and the corruption that sin has brought to it. And our hope is not someday to have our souls transported to some ethereal existence, but that in the end God's kingdom will come firmly to rest on earth, an earth very much material, but purified of all the corruption of sin and death, and ruled over by the One who unites both heaven and earth in His very being. For that we hope and pray, and for that we strive in obedience and good works.

¹³ It is not that any of these individuals never sinned. We certainly know that Abraham and Zechariah did. But these saints always turned back to God and kept following Him, even when they stumbled. That constituted them blameless and faithful.