

Obeying God

Mao-Tse-Tung was undoubtedly one of the 20th century's greatest leaders. He led his Communist cadres to victory and rule over the People's Republic of China. While traveling in the country of China I had the opportunity to view his body which lies in state in a glass coffin at Beijing's Tiananmen Square. The line was long, the guards were armed and the rules were clear – no cameras, no speaking, no stopping. Obedience to the rules was required.

Just as obedience was required to experience Mao dead, obedience is required to experience God alive. Yet obedience is not a popular concept in our current American culture. There are not too many who are anxious to take the priesthood triple vow of poverty, chastity and obedience. Indeed, many prefer prosperity, promiscuity and doing as they please. There are a decreasing number of brides who choose to include "obey" in their marriage vows.

We are a generation given more to rights than responsibilities. We have experienced great emphasis on civil rights, human rights, states' rights and voters' rights . . . even the words "civil responsibilities, human responsibilities, states' responsibilities and voters' responsibilities" have a funny sound to them.

Experiencing God is the very best thing that can ever happen to anyone. It is better than happiness or health or wealth or anything else. And experiencing God requires that we be responsible, that we obey.

The Bible is clear and direct. In John 14:23 Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching." In John 17:6 Jesus defined Christians as those who obey his words.

Later in Romans 6:17-18 we are told that we are either obedient to sin or obedient to God. And in Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus says we are to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

In other words, a Christian is someone who experiences God through obedience.

Now, please don't misunderstand! There is much, much more to the Christian experience than obedience. There is love, forgiveness, mercy, grace, eternal life and more. But let us not list only rights and neglect responsibilities. For to be a Christian is to do what God says - - - to love our neighbors, to forgive our enemies, to be faithful to our marriages, to be honest in our dealings, to be responsible stewards of our money and to share our faith.

Let me explain the concept of experiencing God through obedience by using an analogy.

Experiencing God is the very best thing that can ever happen to anyone. It is better than happiness or health or wealth or anything else.

The United States has an all-volunteer army. People select to be a part of the army by choice. No one is coerced.

Those who enlist are motivated by an allegiance to the United States of America because of a sincere patriotism. While there are benefits, enlistees know that there are also hardships. They will be far from home, the work will be hard and the dangers may be great. But they enlist anyway.

Every soldier operates on trust: trust in the president, the congress, the high command and the field officers. They trust that their basic needs will be met, that their lives will not be recklessly jeopardized and that

they will be treated with dignity and respect.

Trust assumes that the leaders are both competent and compassionate. Trust is a surrender of rights. It is believing in someone else to make the strategic decisions for you.

To be a soldier means sacrifice. Couples have postponed their weddings or sacrificed the large wedding they had dreamed of so that they could quickly get married before the groom was called into active duty. Employees have left their jobs. Mothers have turned over the care of their babies to others because today it is not just young men going into the military.

Sacrifice is saying that being a soldier is more important than being a husband, wife, parent, employee or employer. Sacrifice says that personal priorities and personal happiness must give way to something and someone else.

Discipline is essential for an army. There must be rules and the rules must be kept. Discipline means relinquishing rights, changing schedules, being uncomfortable, behaving out of group interest more than personal interest.

There will be difficulties. Military life is not easy. It can be uncomfortable. In war there is not the luxury of self-interest, self-fulfillment, personal gain or individual choice. War brings long hours, poorer food, distant travel, strained relationships, personal stress, sickness, injury and sometimes death.

Orders must be obeyed. They do not always make sense. All of the information is never available. Explanations may not be offered. Arguments cannot be tolerated. The soldier cannot say, "I don't feel like it", or "You need to accept me the way I am, and I'm not into taking orders."

Without obedience, armies cannot function. It would be chaos. Every soldier who disobeys risks the lives of others. No objective could be reached and no battles could be won. Obedience means doing what is ordered

when it is ordered.

One of the concepts of the military academies is to learn to obey the smallest order. At the United States Air Force Academy freshmen are called "Doolies" from the Greek word "doulos" which means slave. They learn to obey what superiors say. Any soldier who cannot obey in training cannot be trusted to obey in battle.

The goal is victory. The dread is defeat. Victories are not won merely by obedience. Victory requires superior force, superior strategy and superior command. But victory never comes to a disobedient army!

To be a Christian is to enlist in the cause of Jesus Christ, to voluntarily follow him. No one is coerced. The Christian army is an all-volunteer army. However, there is a fierce spiritual battle going on and there are only two sides. Those who do not enlist for good and for God are by default on the side of sin and Satan.

Trust is essential. To be a Christian is to trust the competence of Christ's command. Christians are convinced that God knows what he is doing, that he always has our best interest at heart and that he always gives correct orders, even when they don't fully make sense to us. Therefore, we surrender our rights to him. We choose to have him make the strategic decisions for us.

Following Jesus Christ requires sacrifice. We do not tend to talk about that a lot. Generally we tend to talk about the benefits of being a Christian. And the benefit list is long. It is a list that includes forgiveness, eternal life, joy, love, relationship with God and more.

But there is also sacrifice! Jesus said in Matthew 16:24, "Take up your cross and follow me!" He said that being a Christian may cost us our family and friends. There are Christians who have sacrificed jobs for Jesus Christ, who have lost loved ones for Jesus Christ, who have surrendered careers and

wealth and more.

But it's more than a fair trade! The exchange for the sacrifice is always to our advantage. In the famous words of missionary martyr Jim Elliot, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose."

To be a Christian also means discipline. Discipline means doing what is right even when it is hard to do. St. Paul wrote to a young recruit in the faith named Timothy in II Timothy 2:4: "No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs - he wants to please his commanding officer."

During the Persian Gulf War, women soldiers in the United States Army who were stationed in Saudi Arabia could not wear short-sleeved shirts or short pants even in temperatures that topped 110 degrees. They couldn't go places they otherwise would go because women are severely restricted in that part of the world. They relinquished their rights and practiced discipline because they were soldiers.

Christians do the same. We are willing at times to set aside rights. It may have to do with what we wear or the places we go. It may deal with matters of lifestyle or with relationships. Pleasing our Commander is more important than claiming our rights!

It can be very difficult to be a Christian. Difficulty ranges from inconvenience to death! We march to a different drummer. We have different values. We are not like others. And this often causes problems.

An army recruiter in Minneapolis told me that enlistments soared when the movie PRIVATE BENJAMIN, starring Goldie Hawn, came out. But he said some new recruits were surprised by the real difficulties faced as they

discovered the army wasn't always like the movie.

Likewise, some recruits for Christ, including me, become so enthusiastic about the thrill of being a Christian that we fail to mention the difficulties - and then Christians are shocked when the going gets hard.

The fact is that the Christian life is wonderful, but it is also often difficult! That is why Timothy also received these words from Paul in II Timothy 2:3 when he said, "Endure hardship like a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

This long list comes to its primary point with obedience. Just as soldiers obey, so Christians obey. Matthew 28:20 is clear that a disciple of Jesus Christ is someone who "obeys all that he commands."

That concept is so alien to the way we in

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our society think that it is hard to grasp. A soldier does not decide where to go and what to do on the basis of happiness or

comfort or convenience. A soldier decides where to go and what to do on the basis of orders.

So it is for Christians. The basis of our decisions on where to live, what job to take, to get married or stay single, to witness or be silent, to be a missionary or stay home is not made on the basis of our happiness, convenience or comfort but rather on the basis of obedience to our Commander.

Christians are committed to Jesus Christ. We pray to ask our orders. We read the Bible to learn his commands. We are committed to obedience - that's what a Christian is. That perspective revolutionizes our whole concept of Christianity.

And the end of it all is victory! We Christians get to share and eternally celebrate the

guaranteed victory of Jesus Christ.

In I Corinthians 15:57 we read, “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.”

Let me tell you where this leads us. It leads us to a decision. Will we enlist? Will we commit? Will we obey? Will we be Christian?

It is not risky to obey Jesus Christ! He is the perfect Commander. He loves us and will always do the best for us. He will never do us wrong.

Let me tell you where I am personally. I want to publicly declare that I will obey Jesus Christ. I will do whatever he asks. I will go wherever he sends. If that means leaving here

and going to some distant land, I will go. If that means doing something I’d rather not do, I’ll do it. I commit to obey.

Is that your commitment? If it is, will you tell God? Tell him that you choose to be a Christian. Tell him you choose to obey . . . no matter where, no matter what.

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