

Duty as Delight and Desire

(Preaching Obedience That Is Not Legalism)

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

We may as well concede at the outset that we live, all of us, in a promiscuous, self-indulgent society which prizes autonomy.¹ As a consequence, “obedience” is a tough notion, which we settle mostly either by the vaguest of generalizations, or by confining subject matter to those areas already agreed upon.

I

The fearfulness and avoidance of obedience, as conventionally understood among us, has in my judgment two root causes, both of which are alive and powerful, even though not often frontally articulated.

The first dimension of the problem is the Augustinian-Lutheran dichotomy of “grace and law,” which runs very deep in Western theology. In his treatment of Paul, Augustine considerably upped the stakes of the issue in his crushing opposition to Pelagius, and Luther solidified that theological claim by boldly inserting the word “alone” in his reading of Paul, thus “grace *alone*.” It is clear that by “law” Luther meant many different things, seemingly focused especially on life apart from the gospel. The result, however, has been a remarkable aversion to “works,” as though obedience to the commands of God, that is, performances of “works,” is in and of itself a denial of the gospel. Luther is of course much more subtle and knowing than this, but he has thus been conventionally interpreted. The outcome has been a notion of gospel without demand, a notion which plays well in a “therapeutic” society.

An aspect of this strong dichotomy has been a latent but pervasive anti-Jewish stereotype. Thus “law” is easily assigned to the “Jews,” and the Old Testament becomes a book of commandments which has been “superseded” by the free gospel of Christ. Such a common maneuver of course fails to understand the core dynamic of covenantal faith shared by Jews and Christians, and inevitably feeds anti-Semitism.² It is sufficient here simply to observe that such a reading of the gospel of Paul, powerfully reenforced by a sustained German-Lutheran reading of Romans, is at least open to question. Krister Stendahl has proposed that Augustine and Luther have massively misread Paul, who is concerned not with “guilt,” but with Jewish-Christian relations in the early church.³ And E. P. Sanders has contributed greatly to the exposition of Stendahl’s proposal, so that this governing dichotomy needs to be seriously challenged and reconsidered.⁴ The task of such reconsideration is a difficult one, given the force of these old categories.

The second dimension of our problem is the Enlightenment notion of unfettered freedom of “Man Come of Age.” Indeed, the central program of the Enlightenment has been to slough off any larger authority to which obedience is owed, and that with special reference to the traditional authority of the church.⁵ This notion of freedom is already rooted in Descartes’s establishment of the *human* doubter as the norm of truth. Locke contributed to the cause with his notion of the human person as a rational, free decider, and Kant completed the “Turn Toward the Subject,” in making the human

autonomous actor the one who will shape functional reality. This Enlightenment ideology has received its popular form in a Freudian theory of repression in which human maturation is the process of emancipation from communal authority which is extrinsic to the individual person and therefore fundamentally alien to mature humanness. Thus the human goal is movement beyond any restraints which come under the category of repression.

It turns out, of course, that such a model of unfettered freedom is an unreachable mirage. The individual person is never so contextless, and in the end the fantasy of such freedom has culminated in the most choking of conformities.⁶ There is, to be sure, an element of truth in Enlightenment models of liberation, but such a notion is almost always insufficiently dialectical to bear upon the actual human situation.

These theological-theoretical matters may seem quite remote from the concrete task of "preaching obedience." In my judgment, however, pastor and congregation must engage these powerful (even if hidden) categories and assumptions in critical and knowing ways, in order to face the commands of God honestly. The reason they must be faced is that they are concretely powerful, even if mostly unarticulated. It is false to take the "law/grace" dichotomy at face value, as though the creator of heaven and earth has no overriding, non-negotiable intention for God's creatures. It is equally false to accept the phoney freedom of autonomy, and find ourselves more deeply enmeshed in the commands of death. Only the exposure of these false articulations can permit the community of the gospel to discern and accept its true position before God, who loves, delivers, summons, and commands.⁷

II

A rereading of the gospel of grace and a reconsideration of Enlightenment ideology, in my judgment, will lead to a stunning and compelling fresh awareness: our most serious relationships, including our relationship to the God of the gospel, are, at the same time, *profoundly unconditional* and *massively conditional*. One can, I submit, test this odd claim, both in terms of our normative theological materials and in terms of our lived experience. Such a notion of course violates all of our either/or Aristotelian logic, but our most treasured relations are not subject to such an exclusionary logic.

Much Old Testament scholarship (including some of my own) has championed the notion that there are two traditions of covenant in the Old Testament, one unconditional (Abraham and David) and one conditional (Moses).⁸ While this is critically correct, our theological task is to try to understand these textual claims taken all together.⁹ The evidence to which I am drawn suggests in powerful ways that "conditional/unconditional" and "law/grace" are unworkable categories for understanding our most serious and treasured relationships. And these misguided polarities create great crises for understanding the odd dialectical character of the gospel.

We may take as emblematic of such relationships which are neither conditional nor unconditional, as does the Old Testament texts, the relations of husband-wife and parent-child. In either of these at its best, it is clear that the relationship is unconditional, that is, there is no circumstance under which the relationship will be voided. And yet in these very same relationships, there are high and insistent "expectations" of the other which shade over into demands.¹⁰ And when these expectations are not met, there may be woundedness, alienation, or even rejection, even though the

wounded party is powerfully committed.¹¹ The truth is that there is something inscrutable about such relationships that are both conditional or unconditional; or perhaps we should say neither unconditional nor conditional. If one seeks to make one term or the other final in characterizing such a relationship, we destroy the inscrutability that belongs to and defines the relationship.¹²

It may indeed be regarded as a far leap from our experience with such relationships as husband-wife and parent-child to our relation with God. It is of course a leap made artistically and boldly in the text itself. It will, moreover, be objected that one cannot reason by analogy or metaphor about God, and yet it is the only language we have for this most serious and freighted of all relationships. Moreover, we must ask why the poets of ancient Israel chose to speak this way about God. I suggest that such images are utilized because the poets who have given us our primal language for God are seeking a way to voice an inscrutability that overrides our logic and is more like the inscrutability of serious relationships than it is like anything else.¹³

The covenant God has with us, with Israel, with the world, is a command-premised relation. The covenant is based in command, and God expects to be obeyed.¹⁴ There are, moreover, sanctions and consequences of disobedience which cannot be avoided, even as there are gifts and joys along with obedience.¹⁵ The torah is given for guidance, so that Israel (and all of Israel's belated heirs) are "clued in" to the defining expectations of this relationship. The torah makes clear that the holy "Other" in this relationship is an Agent with will and purpose that must be taken seriously and cannot be disregarded or mocked.

Thus it is a *covenantal relation* which is the "underneath category" to which "grace and law," "conditional and unconditional" are subsets.¹⁶ The "Other" in this relation is a real, live Other who initiates, shapes, watches over, and cares about the relation. The "Other" is both *mutual* with us and *incommensurate* with us, in a way not unlike a parent is mutual and incommensurate with a child, or a teacher is mutual and incommensurate with a student. This means that the relation is endlessly open, alive, giving and demanding, and at risk. This Holy Other may on occasion act in stunning mutuality, being with and for the second party, and so draw close in mercy and compassion, in suffering and forgiveness. It is, however, this same God who may exhibit God's self in unaccommodating incommensurability with rigorous expectation and dreadfulness, when expectations are not met. It is our desperate effort to reduce or "solve" the wonder of "the Holy one in our midst" that leads to such distortions as law and grace, freedom and servitude, unconditional and conditional.¹⁷ No such pairing can adequately contain the inscrutability, liveliness, danger, and unsettled quality of this relationship. Israel thus knows that torah is *guidance*, in order to be joyously "on the way," a way that constitutes the well-being of the relationship.¹⁸

III

This core insight about the richness of a covenantal relation still leaves for the preacher and the congregation the demanding work of taking seriously the specific commands of this covenantal "Other." Clearly the commands and guidance of the God of Israel and of the church are not vague and fuzzy, but quite concrete in how they concern the specificities of life. Those bound with this God are summoned to act differently in every sphere of life. Indeed, obedience consists in bringing every zone of our existence under the will, purpose, and expectation of this covenantal partner.

While the concrete enactments of these commands in almost every case face ambiguity and complexity,¹⁹ the most crucial issue for reflection and preaching is to frame the commands so that they are not alien impositions, extrinsic to our life, but belong to and are embraced as definitional for the very fabric of our existence.²⁰

For that purpose, I suggest two possible interpretive strategies. The first is that the commands of God are the *disciplines essential to the revolution* which is Yahwism.²¹ Every serious revolutionary movement requires exacting disciplines of its adherents. And while the requirements may vary, they all in substance concern single-minded devotion to the revolution, without any doubt, ambiguity, or reservation. A revolution has no chance of success unless all of its adherents are singularly committed to the vision and the project, and are willing to play their assigned role with unquestioning reliability and responsiveness.

The revolution to which the biblical community is summoned is to enact in the world of social affairs a new practice of social relationships marked by justice, mercy, and peace, which touches all of life. In order to engage in such a practice, all those committed to this revolutionary vision are expected to enact the daily requirements concerning self toward God, and self toward neighbor, in order to “advance the revolution.”

Or to change the figure slightly, Jesus and his disciples, that is, the ones under his discipline, are “on the way” as the “Kingdom of God draws near,” a kingdom in which the “normalcies” of life are turned on their head. The disciples are variously summoned and dispatched, to order their lives around “prayer and fasting,” around empty-handed healing power, to live their lives as concrete testimony that the new realm is “at hand,” and can be lived and practiced here and now.

In order to make this approach to “obedience” convincing, believers must come to see their baptism as entry into a new vision of reality, which carries with it all sorts of new possibilities that the world thinks impossible.²² This vision of reality is an oddity in the world, at odds with all the conventional orderings of society, political, economic, and social. This “signing on” is not an “extra” added to a normal life, but entails a reordering of all of one’s life from the ground up. The specificities of obedience must constantly be seen as derivative from and in the service of the larger revolution. It is clear that Moses imagined a whole new way of being in the world, a way ordered as covenant, and the commands of Sinai provide the guidance for that new way. And in like fashion, it is clear that the movement around Jesus evoked such hostility and resistance, precisely because his movement subverted all conventional practices and forms in the world. No doubt such demands and disciplines became “legalistic” when the concrete requirement was no longer understood to derive from a larger revolutionary intention.

I am aware that such a notion of “revolutionary discipline” will not be easily compelling for most of us in excessively complacent establishment Christianity. I do imagine, however, that for many persons (especially young people), such a notion may indeed be a powerful attraction, for it is an enactment of a powerful hope for newness midst an increasingly failed and despairing society.

In any case, I suggest a second strategy for “preaching obedience.” It is this: believers are those who love God with their whole heart, or more colloquially for Christians, “love the Lord Jesus.” Such “love” is to be understood in all its rich implication, both as *agape* and *eros*, as true heart’s desire.²³ This is imagery not often

utilized in our Calvinist inheritance, beset as we are with a heavy sense of duty. But alongside *duty*, in any serious relationship are *desire* and *delight*, the energetic will to be with the one loved, to please the one loved, to find in the joy of the one loved, one's own true joy. Thus one in love is constantly asking in the most exaggerated way, what else can I do in order to delight the beloved? In such a context, one does not count the cost, but anticipates that when the beloved is moved in joy, it will be one's own true joy as well. Indeed, in such a condition, one can find joy only in the joy of the beloved, and not apart from the joy of the beloved.

Thus the psalmist can speak of such true heart's desire:

One thing I asked of the Lord,
that I will seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to enquire in his temple (Psalm 27:4).
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you
(Psalm 73:25).

Of the last verse, Calvin comments:

I know that thou by thyself, apart from every other object, art sufficient, yea, more than sufficient for me, and therefore I do not suffer myself to be carried away after a variety of desires, but rest in and am fully contented with thee. In short, that we may be satisfied with God alone, it is of importance for us to know the plentitude of the blessings which he offers for our acceptance.²⁴

The true believer desires most of all being with the beloved.

None has understood this as well or as eloquently as Augustine, who saw that the most elemental craving of our life is communion with God. He begins his *Confessions* with the well-known affirmation:

Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.²⁵

And in his subsequent comment, he adds,

Thou also gavest me to desire no more than Thou gavest.²⁶

This sense of keen desire, not without its erotic dimension, is echoed in Bach's sterner notion of Jesus as the "joy of man's desiring." Thus "obedience" is a concrete, visible way of enacting and entering that desire, so that duty converges completely with the desire and delight of communion. It is not that obedience is instrumental and makes communion possible, but obedience itself is a mode of "being with" the desired in joy, delight, and well-being. In a quite concrete way, it is profoundly satisfying to do what the beloved most delights in.

Now I imagine that like "disciplines for revolution," the notion of "the desire of the beloved" will not be easy in the starchier traditions of Christian faith. Our more preferred strategy has been to renounce desire and focus on duty, on the affirmation that desire per se is an ignoble enterprise. This way of understanding obedience in relation to desire, however, honors the reality that we are indeed desiring creatures. God has made us so, and so we are. The work of obedience then, is not to squelch desire or deny it, as some modes of piety are wont to do, for then denied desire breaks out in destructive ways. Our work rather is to critique distorted desire and refocus desire on

the true and faithful subject of our proper delight and longing. The intention of consumerism and its ideology of advertising is to distort and misdirect desire, as though the foundational desire of our life is for shoes, deodorant, beer, a car, or the best detergent. At the core of our creatureliness, however, such desires are fundamentally irrelevant. That is not what we want of life and they do not satisfy.

Faith confesses that it is none other than the very creator of heaven and earth who constitutes our true desire, so that only when our hearts rest in God can our restlessness be ended and satisfied. Thus the commandments are specific strategies for redirecting and reaffirming legitimate desire, not in any way a denial of desire, but in full affirmation of true desire. Thus God is the one for whom we seek, "as the deer longs for flowing streams" (Ps. 42:1). The metaphor suggests, according to the older translations, that the faithful "pant for" God and must have God for the wholeness of life. It is no wonder that obedience is a joy and delight, because it is an act in and of itself of communion with the one for whom we constantly and rightly yearn.

IV

The core summons to obedience, that is, a) the core disciplines for the revolution, and b) the core practices of our true desire, are voiced in the decalogue.²⁷ As is well known, the two "tablets" of the ten commands are focused on "love of God" and "love of neighbor." On these two enterprises "hang all the torah and the prophets." Such a simple prospectus for obedience comprehends enormous teaching material through which to invite the baptized to a new life of *revolutionary devotion* and *singleness of desire*.

The first four commands concerning "the love of God" reflect on the true subject of our life, the holy God who is our alpha and omega, the source and goal of all our life. This is the baseline for all biblical preaching and the primal claim of our faith. Our life consists in loving God for God's own sake. That is what we are created to do.²⁸

How odd to yearn toward God! The commands in Exod. 20:1-7 assert that the primal quality and character of Yahweh deabsolutize every other claim and loyalty, and invite the renunciation of every addictive loyalty, conservative or liberal, which drives our life toward restlessness and phoniness. Moreover, the commands show that God is an "end" and not a "means," has no utilitarian value, but is to be loved purely for God's own sake. Such an affirmation about God cuts against all calculating obedience. Long before Job, Moses understood that Israel is called to "serve God for nought" (Job 1:9), that is, to gain nothing but only to be in this lively relation of duty and delight. Imagine what would happen if the church talked honestly about deabsolutizing all our quarrelsome addictions of mind and heart which tend to make all sorts of things absolutes which draw our life into knotted stomachs, clenched fists, and stern speech!²⁹

The second tablet (Exod. 20:8-17) asserts that the second true desire of our life, derivative from the first, is to have "good neighbors," that is, to live in a neighborhood. A true neighborhood is never a gift that floats down from the sky, but is wrought through the revolutionary work of obedience.³⁰ If we ever gain clarity about our true desire, it will quickly become evident to us that the yearning for good neighbors cannot be satisfied by any shoes, deodorant, beer, car, or detergent. They are not what we desire! And so our energy might be redirected toward neighborly matters like housing, education, health care, and away from coveting (Exod. 20:17) and all the distortions

of commandments five through nine which serve coveting (Exod. 20:8-16). It is no wonder that the decalogue is at the center of the Reformation catechisms, and that Luther and Calvin spent so much energy on them. Note well that when revolutionary vision and true desire are manifested, it becomes exceedingly difficult to be coercive and scolding about obedience. These commands are not primarily social restraints or modes of social control, but are about possibilities for life that emerge from “coming down where we ought to be.” But conversely, when we have become ambivalent about the requirements of the revolution or caught in distorted desires, it is predictable that what begins as an offer of communion becomes coerciveness. And yet it is clear no amount of reproof can help people find their way into true communion by way of revolutionary passion or focused desire. Such passion and desire are not generated by strident insistence or ideological imposition.

V

It is only slightly reductive to say that the two great accents of Freud and Marx, sexuality and economics, are the two great arenas for evangelical obedience, and the two zones in which we decide about our devotion to the covenantal revolution and where we enact our true desire. It follows that sexuality and economics, zones of great power, are also the most likely candidates for distortion and loss of the very communion for which we so yearn.

Freud understood that sexuality is a sphere of endless inscrutability, the arena of our true selves and the place in our life for deepest deception and pathology. Thus obedience in sexuality is a primary agenda of evangelical faith, as is evident by the enormously destructive quarrels and high investment of energy in the church, after long centuries of repression, denomination, and exploitation.

It is relatively easy (and I think useless) for the church simply to champion a flat “sex ethic” of a quite traditional kind. That of course is one very live option in the church.³¹ But if obedience in sexuality is to reflect and derive from (either or both) discipline for the revolution and/or a core desire for communion, then the categories of covenantal fidelity and covenantal freedom must be primary ingredients in our thinking and acting. Such a perspective requires much more than embracing traditional mores, because fidelity means something quite different from “abstaining” or “staying married” or “being straight.” It means rather being in a relation that is genuinely life-giving and life-receiving, where the work of neighbor regard is practiced. And covenantal freedom means finding modes of fidelity congruent with one’s true self and the capacity to be emancipated from “legal” relationships that are in fact destructive and hopelessly demeaning. Thus the specificity of obedience in sexuality may most often come down to a “set of workable conventions,” but when that set of conventions is deeply coercive, it does not serve the covenantal revolution, and instead of focusing true desire, it likely crushes desire or misdirects it, so that one’s true self is cut off from God and neighbor.³²

Marx understood, conversely, that money is a sphere of endless inscrutability, an arena of our true selves, and a place in our life for deep deception and alienation. Obedience with money is a powerful agenda for evangelical faith, as is evident by the profound disagreements in the church about ways in which to think about the earning, saving, investing, sharing, and spending of money, and the relative merits of different economic systems and policies. The Bible, moreover, spends enormous amounts of

space and energy on such issues.

It is relatively easy (and I think unhelpful) for the church to champion a traditional ethics of money that simply reflects the practices of society, whether in a market economy or a state economy. It is usual practice for the church in our U.S. context to embrace what is conventionally understood as "Protestant work ethic." It turns out, however, that such a "work ethic" is for our time and place inordinately simplistic, and fails to take into account the ambiguities and complexities of a global economic reality with astonishing disparities between "haves" and "have-nots."³³ Moreover, such an ethic does not seem to make such contact with those who are so affluent that they can create smaller zones of well-being which screen out the presence of the neighbor.³⁴ It seems increasingly clear that the culminating command of Moses, "Thou shalt not covet," now requires a carefully nuanced exposition that for affluent people moves well beyond such conventions as a "tithe," and addresses the systemically driven acquisitiveness of a consumer ethic in which neighbor questions have evaporated.³⁵

As in sexuality, so in economics, covenantal obedience concerns the practice of covenantal fidelity and covenantal freedom, fidelity to see that all of our resources are held in trust in and for the neighbor with whom life is shared, and freedom that entails the practice of choices which attend both to the genuine regard of self and the genuine delight in generosity which enhances the neighborhood. True covenantal desire is not satisfied by acquisitiveness, even on a grand scale, but is satisfied only by the valuing of neighbor, even as self is valued. A reordered perception of obedience in economics is of enormous urgency for the covenantal revolution. It entails a repentance from false desire to which we have become blindly and uncritically committed.

It will be helpful, and in the end necessary, to see that obedience in sexuality and obedience in economics are of a piece. The interrelatedness of the two spheres of obedience exposes a profound contradiction in our common life in the U.S. It is conventional among us (and echoed by the more conservative voices of the church) to seek to impose puritanical restraint upon sexuality, all the while encouraging economic promiscuity for the sake of "economic growth."³⁶ It is not, however, a gain to reverse the process (with dissenting liberals in the church) to encourage economic transformation while being uncritically and thoughtlessly more open about liberty in sexuality. Either way, such disparity sends mixed signals and fails to maintain the delicacy of fidelity and freedom that belongs to covenantal relations.³⁷ Both coercive restraint and sanctioned promiscuity, whether in sexuality or in economics, violate the profound relatedness that belongs to evangelical obedience. It is clear, in my judgment, that the church must learn to speak differently about both spheres, in relation to each other, and in relation to the larger issues of genuine revolution and true desire.

VI

It is my judgment that we live in a moment in the U.S. church which requires a serious and explicit rethinking of the meaning of faithful obedience. At the core of evangelical faith is the claim that faith knows some things which matter for genuine life, which are now urgent for our society. Such an explicit rethinking which is the work of the whole congregation may operate with these affirmations:

1. The Enlightenment offer of unfettered freedom without accountability is an unreachable mirage, an illusion never available to us.

2. The neat and conventional antithesis between law and grace is a distortion of faith, because there are no unconditional or conditional relationships in the gospel, but only relationships of fidelity that prize both freedom and accountability, the two always intertwined and to be negotiated.

3. Baptism is induction into the revolution of the coming rule of God. Like every revolution, this one has demanding disciplines that distinguish its adherents from all others.

4. Baptism is an acknowledgement of our true desire, our eagerness to be with, commune with, delight in, and delight through glad obedience to this life-giving holy Other.

5. It is precisely in our most primary zones of sexuality and economics, that the demands and desires of this alternative life are most demanding and most satisfying. Those demands and desires consist not in the voiced demands of conventional morality nor in the self-indulgence which is an alternative to the flat demand, but in the struggle for the interface of freedom and faithfulness which requires endless interpretive work and reflection.

6. Rejection of disciplines of the revolution and the distortion of our true desire may take place either through flat, one-dimensional traditionalism or through self-indulgence. Such rejection and distortion constitute a betrayal of baptism, and an attempt to live at least some of our life outside this coming rule, and according to the rules of the kingdom of death.

7. Willingness to join the revolution or to practice this core desire can never be coerced. Such engagement is possible only by those who perceive their true identity in this coming rule. And then the disciplines and desire are winsome, joyous, and life-giving, not at all burdensome.

VII

In the core Mosaic proclamation of Deut. 6:5-6, immediately following the summons that Israel should listen (*shema*), Israel is told:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Moses nicely juxtaposes *love* and *keep commandments*, because doing the will of the beloved is the way we enact love. Moreover, commandments are to be kept “in your heart,” that is, they are not extrinsic, imposed, or coerced, but inhaled and embraced as one’s own true will and intention.

This core summons is fleshed out in Deut. 13:4.

The Lord your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandment you shall keep, his voice you shall hear (*shema*), him you shall serve, to him you shall hold fast.

In this series of imperative verbs of obedience, two matters may be noticed. First, in Hebrew in this English translation, the word order is inverted to give emphasis to the object of the verbs, “him...him...him...him.” It is like a lover saying, “You, you, you.”³⁸ Second, the last phrase which the NRSV renders “hold fast” (*dbk*) is elsewhere “cleve” as in Gen. 2:24. It is a term of deep loyalty and devotion, a kind of personal, passionate attachment which far outruns any external, extrinsic rule. Moses envisions a relation of affectionate trust.

Finally, in Mark 10:17-22, Jesus does “pastoral care” for a person who seeks for “meaning” in his life. Jew that he is, Jesus responds to the man by asserting that the assurance he is seeking is found in full obedience to Israel’s core commandments. Jesus assumes the man already knows the commandments. Beyond the commands, Jesus moves to “second level” obedience: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor . . . Come, follow me.” It is as though the commandments are elemental, “first level” access to the revolution, but serious pastoral care moves to a more radical reorientation of life.

We observe three items in this narrative:

1. Jesus does not impose the commandments upon the man. The commands are not Jesus’ idea. They are already there and already known at the beginning of the exchange. They are a premise of the conversation, to which Jesus can make appeal. Jesus credits the man with knowing them, so that there is not a cubit of coercion in the response Jesus makes to the man’s serious enquiry. Nonetheless, the response of Jesus is indeed a serious one. A good future is to be shaped by what is known of who God is, and what God desires.

2. Jesus loved the man (v. 21). Good pastoral care depends upon such a positive disposition toward the subject. Such love, however, does not lead to the romantic easiness of unconditional acceptance. It leads rather to truth-telling which concerns obedience. Nothing imposed, nothing harsh, nothing quarrelsome, only uncompromising truth-telling about the shape of well-being, spoken in love.

3. Jesus’ love, plus the assumption of the commandments, leads to a startling new demand, a demand too heavy for the questioner. The man decided not to join the revolution, and decided to hold to his other “desire” of great possessions.

There is no anger or scolding in this meeting. We are not told that Jesus loved him any the less for his decision. But Jesus’ love toward him, like that of Moses, is obedience-shaped. Jesus was clearly not much committed to “membership growth” in his little flock under revolutionary discipline. The difficulty of course is that truth-telling about well-being in a promiscuous society declares our common desires to be deathly. Obedience thus takes the form of alternative desire. When the holy one is supremely desired, is the “joy of loving hearts,” obedience becomes joy, and duty becomes delight. Such a claim is difficult in the midst of misperceived Enlightenment freedom and in distorted “free grace.” But that in itself is no reason to doubt its life-giving truth.

Israel knew that obedience is the path to genuine life. The commands are a mode of God’s grace:

The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true

and righteous altogether.
 More to be desired are they than gold,³⁹
 even much fine gold;
 sweeter also than honey,
 and drippings of the honeycomb (Psalm 19:7-10).

NOTES

¹ Paul R. McHugh, "Psychiatric Misadventures," in *The Best American Essays 1993* ed. Joseph Epstein (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1993), 192, helpfully speaks of "cultural antinomianism" and explores its costliness for society. The best series of case studies for this condition is offered by Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

² Paul M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish Christian Reality Part 2: A Christian Theology of the People Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 158-159 and passim, has explored a healthier understanding of the matter of torah shared by Christians and Jews.

³ Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78-96.

⁴ Among his important works on the subject, see E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). See his several discussions in the book of "covenantal nomism."

⁵ For a classic discussion of the issues of the Enlightenment *vis-a-vis* the traditional authority of the church, see Paul Hazard, *The European Mind 1680-1715* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1963).

⁶ On the production of conformity and homogeneity by the Enlightenment, see Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment & Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), and his more recent work, *The One, The Three, and The Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁷ Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (New York: New York University Press, 1970) has shown how the dialectic of "saving and commanding" asserts the primal work of God with Israel.

⁸ The clearest, most direct statement of this tension is that of David Noel Freedman, "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: The Covenant Theme," *Interpretation* XVIII (October, 1964): 419-31. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: An Entry Into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Winston Press, 1985) has written a programmatic rebuttal of the antithesis commonly assumed in scholarship.

⁹ See the exposition of Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 532-65, and *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 51-83.

¹⁰ Dennis H. Wrong, *The Problem of Order: What Unites and Divides Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 42-58, has written suggestively about the authority of expectation, though he is concerned for political theory and not theological force. He writes:

The ambiguity of expectation becomes apparent only when we consider its use in communications such as that of a mother telling her child that she "expects" obedience at school to the teacher, or of the admiral addressing the fleet who affirms that "England expects every man to do his duty."

The mother and the admiral are not simply predicting out loud future events or common interest. Their utterances to the child and to the assembled fleet are in the imperative mode: the expectations asserted are intended to bring about the conduct they claim to be anticipating. The child, after all, knows, and the mother knows the child knows, that disobedience at school will be reported at home and lead to possibly unpleasant results.

Expectations may, I have argued, function as imperatives, as normative demands constraining the human objects of expectation to conform to them. The emergence of expectations-cum-norms out of recurrent interaction is a process that goes on all the time, if often in trivial and evanescent ways (42-43, 46, 51).

¹¹ Notice that often the "sanction" is not articulated but is inherent in the expectation itself, because of the authority of the one who expects.

¹² This seems to be recognized even in popular ways, so that the attempt at "unconditional" finally requires some conditionality. See the belated discovery of this in William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *The Pleasure Bond: A New Look at Sexuality and Commitment* (Boston: Brown and Little, 1974) and the analysis of Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982).

¹³ This is a point at which Karl Barth's resistance of the *analogia entis* and his embrace of *analogia fidei* might be considered. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress

Press, 1976), 215-16 and passim, places Barth's concerns in context

¹⁴ E. Kutsch, "Gesetz und Gnade Probleme des alttestamentlichen Bundesbegriffs," ZAW 79 (1967) 18-35, goes so far as to suggest that "covenant" (*berith*) in fact means "obligation"

¹⁵ George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955) made the case that "sanctions" belong to the structure and substance of covenant. More generally see the discussion of Wrong (note 10) on the reality of sanctions in social relations

¹⁶ "Covenantal nomism" (on which see Sanders note 4) nicely juxtaposes terms which articulate the subtle dimensions of covenant as a *relation* and as *demand*

¹⁷ On this phrase, see the old but reliable discussion of Walther Eichrodt, "The Holy One in Your Midst: The Theology of Hosea," *Interpretation* 15 (July, 1961) 259-73

¹⁸ On "the way" as a governing image for Israel's life of obedient faith, see James Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel: Biblical Faith and Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) and Paul Van Burden, *Discerning the Way: A Theology of the Jewish Christian Reality* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980)

¹⁹ Concerning the ambiguity and complexity of the commandments which require ongoing interpretation, see Walter Brueggemann, "The Commandments and Liberated, Liberating Bonding," in *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 145-58

²⁰ I understand legalism to refer to commands which are imposed but not gladly received and embraced as one's own. The model of Job's friends is the standard example in the Bible. Such imposition tends to be rigid and coercive, without taking into account the impact of context or experience. On this matter as it relates to freedom and health, see Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 135-156, and his notion of a "normative personality"

²¹ More than anyone else, Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 489-92 and passim, has shown the ways in which Israel is revolutionary in terms of its social intention. Gottwald's articulation is enormously valuable, even if one does not follow all of his sociohistorical analysis

²² On the relationship between baptism and preaching, see William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992)

²³ It will be recognized that my approach here flies in the face of the classic arguments of Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1932, 1938, 1939, 1953)

I do this with considerable diffidence, because I am thoroughly schooled in Nygren's argument. I have come to think, however, that Nygren imposed categories that may have been required in his context, but that in doing so, he overlooked dimensions of the ethic of Israel and the church that moved beyond duty to the embrace of joy in faith. For our purposes, Nygren's discussion of Augustine (449-563) is especially important

I should also mention that William Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," CBQ 25 (1963) 77-87, has shown that in some cases in the ancient Near East, "love" is a political word bespeaking acknowledgement of sovereignty

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Volume Second* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 155. It should be noted, however, that Calvin still resists the notion of the intrinsic satisfaction of the relationship, and must appeal to "the plenitude of blessing" that seem extrinsic to the relation of communion itself

²⁵ Augustine, *The Confession of St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1951), I

²⁶ *Ibid.* 5. Special attention should be given to the recent study of *The Confessions* by Margaret R. Miles, *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's Confessions* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Against the grain of the argument of Nygren, Miles proposes that the *Confessions* are intended by Augustine to be a "text of pleasure," and that the pleasure of the reader is linked to Augustine's own struggle for pleasure. His argument is that he tried every pleasure the world could offer and only finds his true desire in communion with God. This is not a stifling of desire but the proper focus on the desire which is appropriate to the human heart

Miles summarizes her argument

The *Confessions* is, among other things, a narrative deconstruction of what is ordinarily thought of as pleasurable, and a reconstruction of "true" pleasure. He was quite clear about what constituted the condition of greatest pleasure by the time he wrote the *Confessions* (20). The pleasure experiment has come to a dead end (32). The key to pleasure, for Augustine, was ideally not the sacrifice of some pleasures so that others could be cultivated. It was the ordering of all the pleasures of a human life so that those associated with enjoyment of objects in the sensible world would not usurp all of a person's attention and affection. When pleasures are constellated around a single object of love, he said, they can be enjoyed without fear of distraction (37). Augustine learned more than he acknowledged from sex, that he learned "the deep and irreplaceable knowledge of [his] capacity for joy" from his sexual experience, and that it was precisely *this* experimental knowledge from which Augustine extrapolated his model of spiritual pleasure (71).

²⁷ On the decalogue, see Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (OBT, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), and Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 63-83

²⁸ This is of course reminiscent of the classic answer of the Westminster Catechism, "Man's Chief Concern is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." It is striking that the second half of the sentence speaks of the "enjoyment of God," which

is the satisfaction of desire which encompasses duty and moves beyond duty to delight

²⁹ A proviso is important that such a notion is not an invitation for the preacher to focus on his or her favorite causes or animosities. My impression is that rightly done, the notion of critical obedience gives aid and comfort to no one, but challenges all of our pet modes of utilitarian obedience.

³⁰ On this theme, see Gerhard von Rad, "Brother and Neighbor in the Old Testament," in *God at Work in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 183-93.

³¹ Marva J. Dawn, *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) has shown in a fine study how a rather conventional sexual ethic is open to a much more dense significance.

³² It cannot be said too often, that after Israel (or we) arrive at workable rules, the rules endlessly require on-going interpretation, to take account of context, experience, and new learning. This is inevitable, and we either do it knowingly or without recognizing that we are doing such interpretation.

³³ See the thoughtful discussion of the issues by Ulrich Duchrow, *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987).

³⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), has written an acute study of this propensity in enclaves of wealth in our society.

³⁵ Marvin Chaney, "You Shall Not Covet Your Neighbor's House," *Pacific Theological Review* 15 (Winter, 1982) 3-13, has shown how the tenth commandment is concerned with policies and practices of systemic acquisitiveness.

³⁶ A classic example of this incongruity is the way in which Roman Catholics in this country are uncompromisingly zealous about the issue of abortion (and other matters of sexuality), but are largely indifferent to the wondrous Bishops' Letter on economics. Roman Catholics are no more caught in this than other Christians. I cite the example only because the Pastoral Letters of the bishops would make possible a discussion of both issues, but that discussion is almost everywhere resisted.

³⁷ This contradiction especially sends mixed messages to children and young people. As the commoditization of all of life is encouraged, it is difficult then to imagine that sexuality is an exception to the general rule of promiscuity on which our consumer society is dependent.

³⁸ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, The Early Masters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 212, cites such a prayer from the rabbi of Berditchev:

Where I wander—You!
Where I ponder—You!
Only you, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
When I am gladdened—You!
When I am saddened—You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!

³⁹ It is worth noticing that the term "desired" is *hmd*, the same word that is rendered "covet" in the commandment. Israel properly covets, that is, desires the commandments, the same desiring done by the couple in the garden in Genesis. Israel is supposed to "desire." It matters decisively what Israel desires.