

Obedience to the Will of God

Earl Clement Davis

Pittsfield, MA

No Date¹

Scripture:

Text: "I and my Father are One."²

I wish to speak on obedience to the will of God, and its relation to our moral and spiritual life. In what does it consist? What are its fruits?

Two hundred years have not yet passed since Jonathan Edwards and his followers blew upon the dying embers of Calvinism and caused them to burst forth into the last flickering flame, before its vitality had burned out and left nothing but the cold lifeless ashes of history.³ Yet that last flickering flame of a dying religious system contained a power and a vividness, a warmth from which many a soul received the quickening impulse to a deeper and more spiritual life. Whatever may have been the limitations under which Edwards interpreted his religious experiences, the fact remains that he had been touched by the power of the spiritual life. He had responded to the command of the first great commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind and will all thy soul."⁴ But the second commandment had not touched him deeply. He did not, and could not love his neighbor as himself. He had not gone deep enough, or sympathetically enough into the nature and purposes of the human heart to really give more than formal assent to the command, "Thou

¹ While this manuscript has no date, there are internal references—see below—that strongly suggest this sermon was preached while Earl Davis was minister of the Unity Church in Pittsfield, MA.

² John 10:30.

³ Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) a New England preacher who advocated a more conservative direction as opposed to his fellow New Englander, Charles Chauncy (1705-1787). See Earl Davis' notes on Edwards and Chauncy among the Harvard era manuscripts.

⁴ Matthew 22:37.

shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."⁵ His intellectual surroundings were subject to influences that made this impossible.

Should we analyze that last flame of Calvinism, sometimes spoken of as the Berkshire Divinity, should we analyze it as the chemist analyzes the flames that burn from the substance in his crucible, we would find that it gives evidence of three great elements. The first element, the foundation and cementing substance of the whole system, the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God. This doctrine seems to be an indication of the triumph of a more sensible opinion of the earlier superstitions of New England which formulated a quite clearly defined dualism, as illustrated in the dramatic struggles between God and the Devil.

This doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God is strangely suggestive of, if not prophetic of the results which modern scientists have been dealing out to us for the last few years. The absolute sovereignty of natural law, its universal, and unquestionable activity, bespeaks of an over-ruling power as sovereign and as absolute as ever Edwards or Hopkins or Emmons dreamed of.⁶ Upon this point of the absolute sovereignty of God, the Berkshire Divinities were not so far wrong, if our most modern conceptions have any value.

The second great truth of Calvinism was man's dependence upon God. This is quite in keeping with the most advanced scientific and philosophical notions. When the scientist tells us that there is not one atom of matter in all the universe that is outside the reign of law, when the moralist tells us that every act of a human being must conform in one way or another to the eternal laws of conduct, we are listening to a doctrine of man's dependence upon God set forth in no less exacting terms than the same idea was treated at the hands of Edwards.

So far we can agree as to the essential idea of Calvinism, although we must take exception to the forms in which this idea was expressed, forms which were colored and distorted by the third element which is found in Calvinism. This third element is the one which makes the whole system

⁵ Matthew 22:39.

⁶ Nathaniel Emmons (1745-1840); Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803). Both influential New England Congregational preachers.

obnoxious and revolting, and which was no small factor in causing the onward movement to leave Calvinism behind. The notions of total depravity, and the atonement through Christ, and all the ideas connected therewith are based upon a profound pessimism. If you stop to think of it, the entire system of ideas centering about the expiation of Christ and the doctrine of election, is simply another way of expressing the feelings of the man who thinks that everything is in a bad way, and all things are on the high road to ruin. The true pessimist always reasons from the dire calamity which is about to overtake the multitude, a way of escape for himself and a chosen few. So also did the Calvinists, the few elected to be saved, would, by the grace of God through Christ, enter into eternal peace and gloat over their happy fate. This is a true thoroughgoing pessimism, the last and most complete expression of a pessimism that has been lurking in the system called Christianity since very early days. Perhaps it came from the East, and was absorbed into mechanical Christianity, as it was undergoing its transformation from its earliest days of spiritual power into its essentially unspiritual system.

The old system is passing away. Holmes' wonderful "One-Hoss Shay" is a pointed description of Calvinism.⁷ It was built in such a logical way, that it must collapse. There was no opportunity for repairs. Now it has become hardly more than a faint recollection of a bad dream. Even the most Calvinistic of this generation have not the courage and daring to proclaim the doctrines of this wonderfully logical system. Yet much of the old phraseology and many of the terms are still used but they are so twisted, modified and repainted that one feels that those who use them have not the slightest conception of the strength and ruggedness of the outworn system. They are destroying the historic charm which might center about the remains of "the Wonderful One Hoss Shay" by trying to work them up into timber for a carriage of the modern world. To use a figure from the words of Jesus, they are putting new wine into old bottles which still retain their old labels. Once these bottles contained a live sparkling wine, discolored to be

⁷ Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) published his poem "The Deacon's Masterpiece or, the Wonderful 'One-Hoss Shay:' A Logical Story" in the *Atlantic Monthly* for 1858. It was reprinted in an 1897 collection of writings by Holmes, *The Wonderful "One-Hoss-Shay" and other Poems*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co.

sure, by a brackish pessimism, but still vital. But the wine has been lost and the bottles have been filled by a flat, colorless, insipid water of sentimentalism. If we must have the old bottles and old labels, pray! let us have the old wine also. It was a powerful stimulant to the elect who could drink it.

The Sovereignty of God! and Man's Dependence upon God! Is it possible that the leaders of the Berkshire Divinity absorbed those truths from the very spirit of these mountains? Overcome by the transcendent glory, by the overshadowing power of God as revealed by the rugged ever-changing scenery in the midst of which he lived, did he look upon himself as the most insignificant, the most unworthy of beings, what at best could but faintly utter, "How terribly wonderful?" Can you stand and drink in the beauty and grandeur of the everchanging glory of the hills about us without feeling something of the utter insignificance of man?⁸

We stand on some well-chosen spot, and look about us. We take in at one full sweep the grand panorama of nature about us, its greatness, its tremendous power that can lift great mountains, its infinite patience that can consume thousands of years in slowly wearing the mountains down to hills, by the slow process of rain and frost, its unlimited variety, now the warm bakery day, now the terrible wind and rain. Now the blistering winter storm, all these speak of a power so great and transcendent that we almost instinctively shrink back, expecting to see the great spirit descend upon us from some distant mountain peak, and speak with a voice as terrible as man ever heard. "What are you that ye think that I am mindful of you?" But the God with his terrible majesty does not come, and soon we are lost in the trance of meditation, that comes over one as he stands before the shrine of nature. The windows and doors of the soul open, the spirit flows in, the soul is filled, and feebly from the depths of our being we utter the simple words, "How wonderful it is?" Into the divine silences of our being comes the God who speaks within, saying to us, "I made all this beauty and wonder-world in which you live. But you! You! I made with the power to see, to understand, to speak, and with the simple words of wonder and beauty to

⁸ These references to the Berkshire mountains are a strong suggestion that this sermon was delivered while Earl Davis was the minister of the Unity Church in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

express thoughts and truths that are eternal. To you I have given the power to think over again my thoughts after me."

Here we must part company with the Calvinist. With him we can see the truth of the sovereignty of God; with him we can see the truth of man's dependence upon God. But he has built his system in such a logical way that he had failed to look into the human soul, he had failed to recognize the Divine power working its way to light in the midst of a struggling hopeful humanity. The real meaning of the words of Jesus of Nazareth, "I and my Father are one" had not touched his logical soul, and given his dark and morbid mind the light to true spirituality. We part company with him here because we dare to say as Jesus did, "I and my Father are one." This is the touch. This is the gleam of truth that destroys forever the gloomy pessimism of the dying system.

Upon this truth, that you and I dare to say, "I and my Father are one" rests the high obligation of obedience to the will of God. Not an obedience born of fear, or a sense of weakness in the presence of a power so great. But an obedience born of the profound respect of our own Divine nature, and strengthened and made vital by the real presence of God in the human soul.

Obedience to the Will of God! Do we mean by that the conformity to those laws which everywhere rule with an iron hand the things of nature? Those laws according to which the earth is made and in accordance with which the seasons come and go, animals live and die. It would be a mere mass of words to speak of such obedience. Whether we will or not, we are a part of nature, and as such we must conform to her laws. With the dust at our feet we share in the obedience to that law which binds into a system the Universe. With the animals who minister to our needs we share the laws of generation, life and death. Not by one iota can we escape these eternal, ever active laws by which, in common with [the] earth, stones, animals of every form, we become a part and parcel of things about us. But here do we find that obedience to the will of God, which is the very heart of the highest and best of the religious life. Still further that highest obedience is not identical with, or to be confused with, that obedience which men pay to the social and moral laws by which our daily conduct is, to a large extent, governed. These laws also have their authority, and demand our obedience, and we disobey at the

peril of our social and moral wellbeing. It consists not in the careful and painstaking obedience which we pay to the dictates of another person or book or institution that presumes to be a mediator between the human soul and God. All these forms of obedience from the obedience to the natural laws which we cannot escape to the obedience to the highest moral laws, which we can escape, fails of reaching that highest and most complete obedience to the Divine Will, that obedience which is the source of the peace that passeth understanding. What that obedience is can be easily seen by one who obeys, but to express it in terms of words, so that another may see is difficult. It consists in the first place of the self-abnegation, or rather that self-assertion of the spiritual powers which lifts one above all considerations of the day and the hour in which one lives. One seems to free himself from his body to become a free agent of the spiritual world. It is something like the feeling which comes over one by the sea shore. To sit for hours at some spot and watch the ceaseless rise and fall of the waves, to be lulled into a half slumber by the swish of the breaking waves as they chase each other up and down the beach, until finally the shoreline in the distance become dim, and we seem to become a part of the great ceaseless, restless ocean. The world about us is forgotten, that activity and alertness so characteristic is passed, and our soul has gone on a journey to the infinite. This is the feeling that comes over us occasionally as we open the windows of our soul in the presence of the great Divine world.

From this strange vacant-like feeling, as if all the common ordinary powers of our being had left us, we are awakened by the growing consciousness of the presence within us of a power, greater than our own. It seems to fill every smallest secluded nook of our being just as the incoming tide fills the most remote creek of the bay. Now thoughts, high and noble conceptions of life, appear to us. We are in the real presence of God, and see our own true noblest self as clearly and as perfectly, as an object in our hand. It is as if we took a powerful telescope, and by its means brought the distant mountain to our feet that we may examine it.

At such moments it seems as if we are standing by the side of the way watching the great army of noble souls marching fearlessly to the life of peace that passeth all our understanding. We are led by an almost irresistible

impulse to leap into the thing, to be born along by the tide of divine beings, responding without a thought of looking backward, to that esprit de corps which has carried so many out [of] their dissatisfaction, and discontent, into the true free spiritual obedience to the Will of God, the God whose will it is that each human being shall feel as Jesus did, that "the soul and the Father are one." Could we but give our [own] selves up to the voice that commands to the highest that speaks within us in those moments when the windows of our soul have been opened and the soul has been filled by the real presence, there would [the] soul rise in its might and free itself from the entangling claims of things that rust and {??} corrupt. With that power, our daily life would become transformed, and to the ordinary duties of life we would give a joyous obedience, for through them is the real life lived.