

Using biochemistry to understand 'obedience'

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This week I've decided to post an essay I wrote last summer for my MA studies. Hopefully it will give you an idea of what kind of research I'm doing and how it might relate to (and thus be useful for) my pastoral work. It's an academic piece of work, so I wouldn't blame you if you found it hard to read, but what I'm trying to convey is relevant for anyone who cares about the role of obedience in church or community. This essay also illustrates that my 3-year undergraduate course in biochemistry has value in the work I'm doing now! If you don't fancy reading the entire essay, just skip to the conclusion at the end where I describe an exciting model of pastoral ministry based on biological cells.

How Might We Understand the Idea of Obedience in the Pastoral Relationship?

Of the three religious vows – chastity, poverty and obedience – Aquinas said that obedience is chief.[1] Today, however, there appears to be an urgent problem of obedience in the Church. For the Church to best fulfil its mission in the contemporary world, the scope and sphere of exercising its authority requires revision.[2] Although the cultivation of obedience is promoted by religious life, it 'is no longer a fashionable virtue'.[3] People are currently suspicious of institutional authority, especially those that demand obedience. The famous Milgram experiments demonstrated that a 'substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority.'[4] Reflecting on Nazi Germany's Final Solution of the Jewish question and massacres carried out in Vietnam by US military forces, Stanley Milgram offered a bleak evaluation: the capacity for people to abandon their humanity as they merge their unique personalities into larger institutional structures is a fatal flaw in humanity that could lead to the discontinuation of our species.[5] With such a pessimistic view of the natural human tendency to obey, it is understandable that the reputation of obedience is in ruins.



Various attempts to defend the virtue of obedience have focused on differentiating between obedience to people from obedience to God. Obedience to God should be unconditional whereas obedience to people should be conditional on that person being a clear channel for God's direction. Discriminating between the two has, understandably, created problems. It is often not easy to distinguish when a person with pastoral responsibility is effectively communicating God's commands or is conveying their own purposes. Current understanding equates obedience with unquestioning compliance and execution of instruction. What this essay proposes is that

the original understanding of the meaning of the word 'obedience' has been lost through history, and a return to its original literal meaning ('to listen to') presents a fresh opportunity to extol its virtue.

Before investigating the meaning of the obedience, the nature of the dynamic where it is expected must be examined.

What is a pastoral relationship?

There is virtually no limit to the range of possible pastoral relationships; they are not exclusive to those involving ordained ministers. Parents pastor to their children, teachers their students, employers their employees; wherever someone seeks wisdom from another who is relatively more wise, the possibility emerges for pastoral ministry. Since the light of truth shines on all aspects of life, every human affair should be guided by spiritual wisdom. Such is the limitless scope of pastoral theology.

For an institution like the Church, however, it is helpful to focus its the clear hierarchical relationships. Any lessons learnt here can be applied more broadly to the relationships that exist more widely in society. For a definition of a professional pastoral relationship, Richard Gula provides the following:

By a professional pastoral relationships I mean one wherein the minister is

acting as a representative of the church so that people can draw from his or her special authority and competence to meet a religious need (pastor serving parishioner; spiritual director serving directee; catechist serving students);

serving in a supervisory role over others (pastor to staff; director of religious education to catechists).[6]

In voluntary relationships of pastoral care, the one seeking care may approach someone whom they know from prior experience is trustworthy and reliable. In professional relationships, the provider of pastoral care may be relatively unknown to the one seeking care and so the trust is based on the assumption that appointment by authority from the church is sufficient proof of trustworthiness. The superior must acknowledge this inherent assumption and act to earn the already given trust. As a representative of the Church, their success or failure may decide the faith or disbelief of the person under their care. Desiring to be a channel for God's love and truth, the superior must be careful not to become an obstacle or distraction. It is also important that subordinates exercise their own moral judgement when seeking guidance and care.

What is the current understanding of obedience?

William Wainwright offers a helpful summary in his chapter of *The Wisdom of the Christian Faith*, in which he defends obedience as 'a central feature of the Christian life, integrally connected with other Christian virtues such as faith, charity, and the imitation of Christ.'[7] He begins by qualifying that 'Obedience or disobedience to divine authority is... of a qualitatively different order than obedience and disobedience to human authority.'[8] 'Given human fallibility and sinfulness,' Wainwright explains, 'submission to one's superiors cannot be reasonably unconditional.'[9] His principal assertion is that the 'essence of obedience is surrender.'[10] Referring to the Great Commandment of Luke 10:27 as evidence that God commands us to surrender, Wainwright infers that to 'obey God, I must consequently surrender to him... surrender is *itself* a form of obedience because it involves handing one's will over to God. If I surrender to God, I necessarily obey him in will and deed.'[11]

Correcting this definition of obedience is the aim of this essay. While there is value in surrender of one's own will to the will of God, it is an obedience of lower maturity than the obedience of one whose will is already one with the will of God. Noah, a man of dutiful obedience, 'walked with God' (Gen 6:9) whereas the father of faith, Abraham, was commanded by God to 'walk before [God] and be blameless' (Gen 17.1). While Noah followed the commands of God, being led by the hand of God, Abraham was given free reign to let go and walk ahead, without need for commands. When told about the destruction of humanity by the impending flood, Noah simply did what the Lord had commanded him. By contrast, Abraham was upset when God announced he would destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In an attempt to save the cities, Abraham bartered with God to ransom them. This is a higher degree of maturity, and is the type of obedience that this essay aims to define.

On one hand, Wainwright warns that 'by making God's authority over us depend on our will, we make God's will depend on ours. In effect, we substitute our will for his, and that is a form of idolatry.'[12] On the other hand, he somewhat paradoxically notes that 'Unconditional submission to God's commands and reliance on one's own ethical judgements are not inconsistent'.[13] In order to make a volitional response, both the emotion and the intellect need to be engaged, perceiving the goodness and reasoning the truth of a request. This leads to an understanding of obedience not as surrender but as a response to love: 'Our love of God is, or should be, a response to *his* love... Our love becomes an imitation of his.'[14] Obedience then becomes not a parrot-like repetition of actions to do as one is told but to mirror the love one receives by practising it for oneself.

Cantalamessa echoes the previously stated differentiation between the obedience of man to man and the obedience of man to God.[15] He extrapolates this to discover that 'Disobedience to God is at the root of every disobedience and obedience to God is at the root of every obedience.'[16] He summarises that since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church speaks of responsible obedience, obedience

through dialogue or charitable obedience.[17] The juxtaposition of these words or phrases next to the word ‘obedience’ allows for more nuanced meanings of obedience to emerge. To demonstrate the contractual nature of obedience, Cantalamessa also notes that Christian obedience is rooted in baptism, as it is through this that a covenantal vow is made to obey.[18] Also worthy of note is Cantalamessa’s distinguishing between the obedience of Jesus, doing the will of the Father, and the obedience of believers, which is obedience to the Gospel, and ultimately Christ.[19] When obedience is understood not as ‘assent to the thing being commanded, but to the authority of the one who commands it’,[20] the believer is fundamentally seeking to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ through the Gospel. Since the Gospel is one of love, obedience to the Gospel can also be understood as an act of charity:

It is true that in all human groups obedience looks on the lawful head as the organizer of the common good and carries out his orders in an atmosphere of good will which unites the individual members in the pursuit of this good. But this is even more truly the case in the Church. For here the bond of good will is the bond of charity. Charity unites the members with God and with their neighbour for God’s sake and is itself the common good of the Church. It is both the source of obedience and the end of obedience, its inspiration and its consummation.[21]

As recipients of God’s charitable love, people are inspired to then obey the command to be charitable. Since the end of obedience is charity, caution should be exercised with uncharitable commands. A subordinate should remember that in ‘certain circumstances, therefore, even disobedience may become a duty.’[22]

A revised paradigm of obedience

The core argument of this essay is that the meaning of obedience has been historically altered, and that the original meaning of the word needs to be rescued to liberate the notion of obedience.

Cantalamessa examines how it is possible for lay people to practice obedience through a careful unravelling of the meaning of the Latin, Greek and Jewish origins of the word ‘obey’:

Lay people have not got a superior in the Church to whom they owe obedience, at least not in the sense that religious and clerics do. They have, however, a ‘Lord’ to obey! They have his Word! From its remote Jewish origin the word ‘obey’ means ‘to listen’ and in particular to listen to the Word of God. The Greek term for obedience in the New Testament (*hypakouein*) literally translated means ‘to listen carefully’ or ‘pay attention’, and the Latin word ‘obedientia’ (from *ob-audire*) means the same thing.[23]

The act of obedience is thus defined as the ability to listen to God, especially to God’s Word. In summary, obedience in its original significance ‘means submission to the Word, recognising its real power over us.’[24] Cantalamessa uses this definition to explain the definition of disobedience:

Disobedience (*parakoneia*) means listening carelessly, with distraction. We could say it means listening in a detached or neutral way without feeling in any way obliged to act on what is being listened to and thus reserving one’s own power of decision. The disobedience are those who listen to the Word but, as Jesus says, do not act on it (cf. Mt 7:26). It is not so much that they do not act on it as that they do not even think about acting on it. They study the Word but without the idea of having to submit to it; they dominate the Word, in the sense that they are masters of the tools of analysis, but they do not want to be dominated[25]

Cantalamessa warns against the institutionalisation or secularisation of obedience, analogous to the secularisation of charity, in which the form or shape of obedience is performed from a spirit of discipline or simply habit, rather than the genuine obedience that acts as an authentic response to the will of God.[26] His remedy to this trap is to enter the favour and delight of God by learning to say “Here I am!” Cantalamessa proposes this expression as a simple and short yet dear expression of obedience to God. Reflecting on Adam’s reluctance to call out “Here I am” when God called him after Adam had sinned, Cantalamessa muses on the potentially missed opportunity for pardon which marked the destiny of humanity since.[27]

Why have there been errors in the understanding of obedience?

It is helpful to recognise the manner in which the associations with obedience evolved. William Haines identified the 14th century as the time when the the meaning of obedience was altered:

In the 14th century the word ‘obedient’ meant the “act or fact of obeying,” coming as it did from Old French *obeissance* which derived from *obeissant*, which was the present participle of *obeir*. The meaning of the English word ‘obedient’ altered in the late 14th century to “bending or prostration of the body as a gesture of submission or respect” when it became confused with abaisance which is derived from abase. Abase is derived from the 14th century word *abaishen* which comes from the Old French *abaissier* which

means to “diminish, make lower in value or status; to humble or belittle oneself; cause to feel shame; hurt the pride of.” Thus the meaning of the word ‘obey’ changed significantly as it was confused with ‘abase’.

So we have here two meanings for the words obey and obedience. The original one linked to listening to and the newer one by its confusion with abase and abasement meaning submission, bowing, yielding and executing commands.[28]

It was the confusion between the meanings of these two very similar Old French words that led to our current understanding of obedience straying from the original etymology of the word. This serves as an example of the importance of defining terms clearly. As the alteration of the meaning obedience has demonstrated, what was originally meant as paying careful attention to someone, or to God, transformed into diminishing submission to the authority above. Relationships of obedience subsequently became more one-sided.

Analysing the current state which has been created by this inaccurate definition of obedience, Dominian recognises three reasons for the failure of the Christian community as a whole to read the signs of the times in the realm of authority:

The first has been to associate the kingdom of God with an authoritarian system, dependent on the use of authority as a source of power, generating feelings of fear and guilt in its adherents which are foreign to the message of the Christian Gospel, where authority is seen primarily as service and where the essential message of love is incompatible with fear.

The second is the failure to discriminate between supporting law and order in the community something that the basic conservative nature of recent Christianity has found easy to do, and the evolution of human relationships from positions which belong to early childhood where inequality, fear and dependency predominate, to the more mature later stages in which maturity is seeking equality of personal worth in the presence of differentiating capacities and characteristics...

...The third, and in some ways the most serious, failure of all is that the Christian community has fostered ideals which have encouraged the characteristics of early childhood emotional immaturity, and have perpetuated that immaturity in its various structures, particularly the priesthood.[29]

The Church is immature. It cannot grow nor develop because it treats its members as immature. Until believers are respected for the potential they have to become mature, the Church will not be able to effectively care for its own members or the wider community. This view of the human condition is pessimistic and is arguably heretical as it fails to believe in the potential perfection of humanity. People are called to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5:48). Being maintained in a perpetual state of imperfect maturity denies every person the opportunity to fulfil their destiny as a child of God.

What should pastoral power look like with a revised understanding of obedience?

Examining 2 Cor 3:17 and Rom 8:14-17, O’Meara leads to the conclusion that Christian service is grounded in Spirit. The Spirit provides a power which is universal while simultaneously affirming the personal freedom of the individual. ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’ St Paul says, and O’Meara contrasts this against the irony that most religions oppose freedom.[30] Pastoral ministry guided by the Spirit should acknowledge the freedom of the person being ministered. Denial of freedom denies them the Spirit, which denies the opportunity to respond in love to the call of God’s word.

Müller reinforces the difference between obedience to God and obedience to people, but concludes ‘it would be wrong to explain the present problems of obedience in the Church simply as a lack of obedience to God.’[31] He goes on to question whether ‘actual obedience towards men is even possible.’[32] Nevertheless, he postulates that it may be possible or even necessary for one person to obey another firstly when a person needs guidance, secondly to preserve order in society and thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, for love.[33] He qualifies this by calling for a discretionary exercising of freedom. The mature person knows that they are not perfect and recognises the need for further instruction and guidance. With a conscience that recognised the moral duty not to surrender blindly to any form of guidance, the person chooses a guide from whom appropriate partial guidance can be sought.[34] This creates a consensual two-sided relationship, whereby obedience is offered rather than demanded, seen not as a duty but as a privilege.[35]

Genuine authority is carried out by service, ‘a service which, like that of Christ and his apostles, must be inspired by love and carried out with love, without the seeking of personal benefit.’[36] Gula notes that a ‘significant moral dimension of the pastoral relationship is the inequality of power’[37] and for Müller, the weight of responsibility within a relationship of obedience lies mostly with the superior. Amongst the rules guiding the relationship of obedience, he emphasises the need for docility, not just of the inferior, but especially of the superior. ‘Because he, too, has to obey the eternal law he must always be prepared to give up an error, accept something new and to correct or change an opinion when fresh facts have come

to light. Indeed, docility, combined with humility, seems to be one of the best means to avoid arbitrary judgements.’[38] Müller concludes that ‘the best results are obtained and painful crises avoided if both superiors and subjects are always conscious of having a common task in fulfilling the eternal law.’[39]

Cantalamesa referred to St Basil to explain that love is the greatest motivation for obedience:

St Basil says there are three dispositions with which one can obey: the first is a fear of punishment, as in the case with slaves; the second is a desire for reward, as in the case of mercenaries; the third one is out of love and this is the attitude of sons and daughters.[40]

Pastoral ministers should want to elevate the people they serve to the position of God’s sons and daughters, not trap them at the level of slaves or even mercenaries. This fundamental understanding of human identity should act as a reminder to the style of serving authority that a God, as parent, exhibits with humanity.

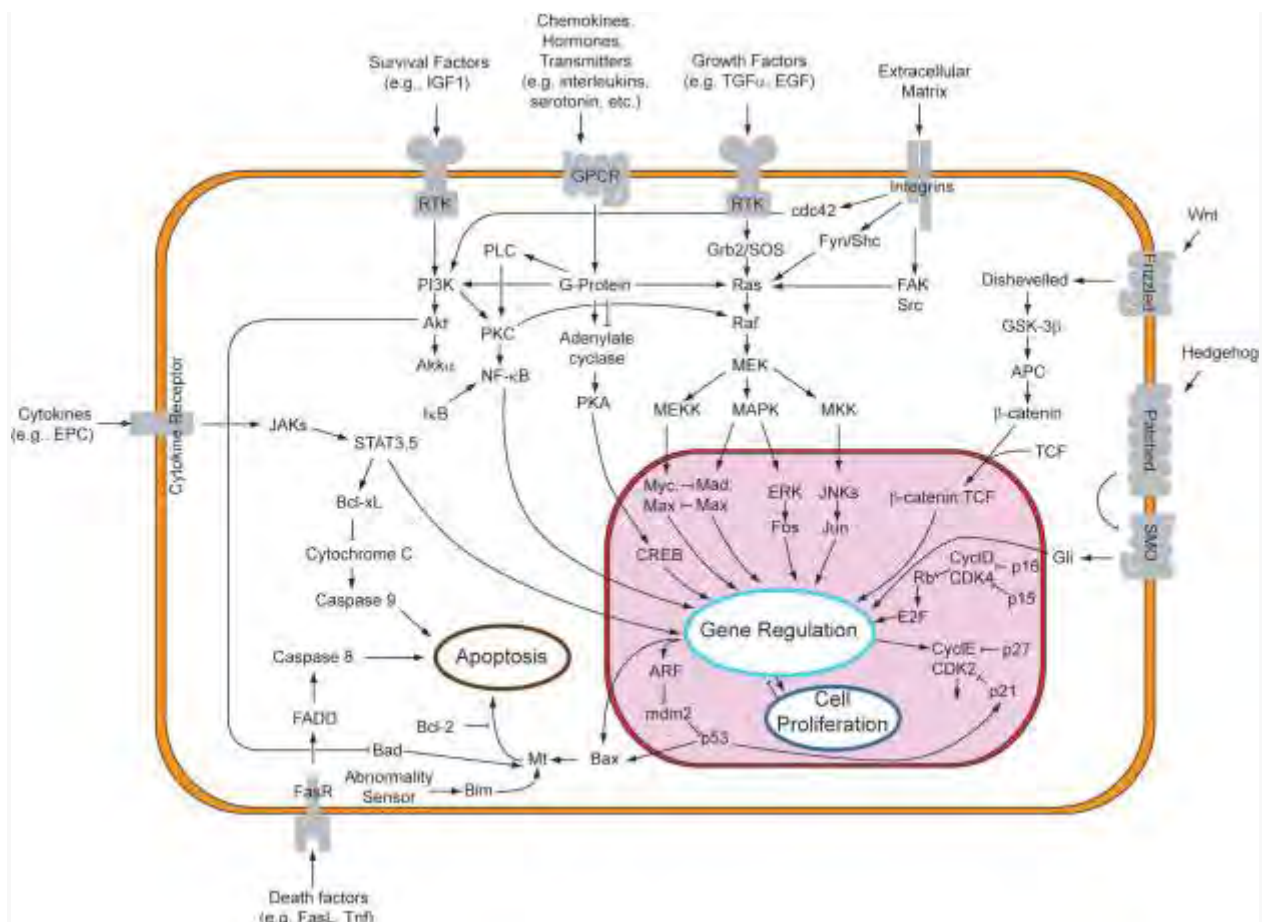
Writing a decade earlier, practising psychiatrist Jack Dominian advocates a much greater balance between obedience and autonomy:

What is needed is a raising of man’s autonomous capacity to act as a self-directing person who can evaluate the claims of all authority. *Christian claims to educate and foster the moral man must make this another priority.*[41]

Not only is Dominian advocating the recognition of the autonomy of individuals for their own sake, but he links this with the future success or failure of Christian evangelism:

No one watching Christianity today can fail to see that one of the vital steps it must take is to shift the emphasis from obedience and conformity to autonomy and the personal encounter, for both make far stronger demands of love and no amount of preaching about love will be effective unless human beings are taught to recognize and translate it into action every moment of their lives. Only when Christians are seen once more doing this in sufficiently recognisable terms will the world take notice of them again.[42]

Some hopeful optimism is provided by Müller who cites experience as showing ‘that whenever institutional safeguards have been removed the inevitable initial upheavals have been followed by positive developments.’[43] While young people today are institutionally unprotected, Müller admits that the natural foundations of authority have become more visible. With a more transparent society in terms of authority, ‘truth and falsehood, good and evil have equal opportunities.’[44] Optimists will recognise the opportunity for good to triumph in this context. Despite the initial shock and confusion created by the erosion of institutional authority, the newly emerging dynamic between pastors and those they care for will be governed by a far more natural authority.



I'm weird – this diagram excites me!

A biological cell model of pastoral ministry

The pastoral approach promoted by this essay can be understood by analogy to the process by which a biological cell within an organism “obeys” the commands it receives:

Every cell possesses within itself the potential, stored in its DNA, to respond in a particular fashion. It will not respond unless there is an extracellular stimulus that provokes an intracellular response. The organism communicates messages throughout the body via nervous and chemical signals. These messengers arrive at the cell and will be received by specific signal receptors. Cells lacking these signal receptors will be insensitive to the signal messengers. Once a signal receptor on the surface of the cell detects its reciprocal signal messenger, an intracellular signalling cascade will begin by which messages are conveyed to the DNA within the cell’s nucleus to begin transcribing DNA into RNA, which is subsequently translated into proteins, which in turn elicit the appropriate response required by the original extracellular signal.

There is no coercion or compulsion in this process. The host organism in faith communicates the message throughout the body and trusts that the cells will respond to the stimuli in the appropriate fashion. The cells will respond as requested, as they have the potential within them stored deeply in their core. All that is necessary is for certain conditions to be met to allow the cells to perceive the signal and respond to the message.

If those in a position of pastoral responsibility recognise that within the heart of every believer is a spiritual DNA waiting to respond to the voice of God’s word then they will realise that their responsibility is not to coerce the believer into a specific response or behaviour but rather to create the right conditions that allow the word of God to be perceived by the believer, thus producing a charismatic response. This requires a discipline in the pastor to unconditionally let go of the outcome or result; while the pastor should expect a response, the pastor cannot expect what that Spirit-inspired result will be.

When pastors in the Church respect the autonomy of those they serve, and admit their powerlessness to affect another person, liberation will be experienced by the pastor and the one being guided. The sole duty of the pastor is to create the best environment for God’s Word to be received and understood, setting off a chain reaction within the heart of every believer that allows them to obey God.

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Notes

[1] William J. Wainwright, ‘Obedience and Responsibility’, in *The Wisdom of the Christian Faith*, ed. by Paul K. Moser and Michael T. McFall, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 58-76 (p. 70).

[2] Alois Müller, *Obedience in the Church*, trans. from the German by Hilda Gräf, (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), p. 9.

[3] Wainwright, ‘Obedience and Responsibility’, p. 58.

- [4] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 189.
- [5] Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p. 188.
- [6] Richard M. Gula, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry*, (Mahwah, N.J.: St Paulist Press, 1996), p. 66.
- [7] Wainwright, 'Obedience and Responsibility', p. 58.
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- [25] Cantalamessa, *The Authority of the Word*, p. 61.
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- [31] Müller, *Obedience in the Church*, p. 77.
- [32] Müller, *Obedience in the Church*, p. 79.
- [33] Müller, *Obedience in the Church*, p. 80.

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[38] Müller, *Obedience in the Church*, p. 98.

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[40] Cantalamessa, *The Authority of the Word*, p. 19.

[41] Dominian, *Psychological Evolution of Authority*, p. 21.

[42] Dominian, *Psychological Evolution of Authority*, p. 24.

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[44] Müller, *Obedience in the Church*, p. 128.

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