

Authority, Submission, & Vows

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What is the Christian's motive for submitting himself to the authority of Christ? It could be maintained that there is no one single motive for submitting yourself to Jesus as your Lord. Instead the Scriptures present us with a myriad of motives toward this end. Sometimes we are exhorted to obedience by a contemplation of the greatness of God, by a sober consideration of His holiness and power. Sometimes we are exhorted to obedience by the fear of the Lord. The Westminster Confession, Chapter XIV, *Of Saving Faith*, states, "By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come." According to the WCF, saving faith yields obedience to the commands of God. But what is it that moves a believer to obey?

A number of different motives may be at work in our hearts at any given moment. Here are a few that are worthy of note:

- 1. Duty:** Sometimes Jesus urged His disciples to act out of a sense of duty or obligation. In Luke 18:1 we read, ¹"Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they **ought to pray** and not to lose heart..."
- 2. Love:** In Psalm 63:3 David seeks the Lord out of a sense of loving devotion when he says, ³"Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise You." Here David responds in love to the lovingkindness of God for him.
- 3. Blessing:** In Psalm 103:1-3 we find the Psalmist is moved to give thanks to God and *bless* God because of the blessings he has received from God. ¹"Bless the LORD, O my soul and all that is within me, bless His holy name. ²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits. ³Who pardons all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases..."
- 4. Desire:** In Psalm 37:4-5 David urges us to delight in the Lord and He will give us the desires of our hearts. ⁴"Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. ⁵Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it." We may at times be moved to pray in order to pour out our desires to the Lord. What do you desire to see happen spiritually in your life, family, in the life of the Church?
- 5. Need:** When you see the great and overwhelming needs that exist in your own life, in your family, in the world, you may be moved to pray. In Matthew 9:35-38 Jesus looks at the multitudes and urges us to pray for God to send laborers to work in the teeming harvest field of souls. ³⁵"Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. ³⁶"Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then He *said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. ³⁸Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."
- 6. Trial/Tragedy:** When you undergo great hardship or trial in your life you may be moved to cry out to God in prayer. In 2 Samuel 12:16 David pleads with God for the life of his infant son who was gravely ill. ¹⁶"David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground."
- 7. Danger:** In Psalm 59:1 David cries out for deliverance from those who are seeking to take his life. When your life is threatened, when you encounter sickness, disease, death, or persecution you may be moved to pray. ¹"Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;

set me securely on high away from those who rise up against me." Although I do not desire it, I believe that a healthy dose of persecution would completely revolutionize the vitality of the Christian Church today! Frivolity and silliness would evaporate in the church like the dew on a hot summer's day. The most attended meeting would be the prayer meeting. [See: Acts 5:16-31; 5:41]

8. Reward: In James 1:12 the Lord promises reward for those who are standing strong in the face of trial. ¹²*"Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."* A contemplation of reward may be a great motive to seek the Lord and serve Him in the face of trial.

9. Experience of mercy: In Romans 12:1-2 the Apostle Paul appeals to the great mercy of God as a motive for moving us to present ourselves to the Lord as *living sacrifices*."

While all of these motives [duty, love, blessing, desire, need, trial, danger, and reward] are legitimate, the Apostle Paul gives us a major and most effective motive in Romans 12:1-2. Perhaps this passage contains the most powerful of all motives unto obedience. Paul writes, ¹*"Therefore I urge you brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual (reasonable -logikos) service of worship."* ²*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."*

Notice what motive the Apostle sets before the Roman believers. The phrase *"by the mercies of God"* could modify the verb *"urge,"* describing the motive for Paul's exhortation, or it could modify the verb *"present,"* describing that which ought to move believers to offer themselves in service unto the Lord. I am convinced, that while it could be taken either way, it is most likely that which Paul calls upon to motivate the Roman Christians to offer themselves unto the Lord as living sacrifices. It is by a deep knowledge of and experience of the profound mercy of God shown to us in Christ that we should be moved to give ourselves over to a life of sacrificial obedience in His kingdom. To the extent that I am unwilling to present myself to Jesus as a living sacrifice, it reveals either that I have taken my eyes off of the mercy of God in Christ, or have failed to comprehend it or experience it as I ought. A knowledge of the fact that I deserve God's judgment in hell and yet I have been set free from condemnation through Jesus and have been given heaven instead, should move me to a life of obedience. When I drink deeply at the well of God's mercy my soul is moved to submit to Jesus as my Lord, and then I do not find His commandments burdensome. I will not find it *unreasonable* to do whatever He commands me. On the contrary I will find that this is my *reasonable service of worship*. This perspective will then put me in the right frame of mind for service in the body of Christ, for life in the Church.

Where has Christ invested His authority on this earth? It is in the Church! With whom has He invested His authority to govern His Church? Is it with the individual himself so that he makes all of the decisions effecting his spiritual well-being by himself? Is it with the congregation so that every decision of rule and oversight must be ratified by congregational vote? Is it invested in one particular man who holds in himself the authority to rule and govern?

The biblical answer to the options above is "no!" Rather, the government of Christ is invested in the officers of the Church. Jesus has invested His authority as Lord and Head of the Church in under-shepherds, who are called "elders." Jesus entrusted the care and oversight (John 21; feed, tend) into the hands of elders, first to Peter and the other apostles, and from them into the hands of other

godly men; "fellow-elders" (1 Peter 5). The sheep of His flock have been allotted to the charge of these elders who have been invested with the authority of the Chief/Good Shepherd in order that they may govern, rule, and oversee the life of the flock for its spiritual well-being.

To this end we covenant together to walk together as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America. The vow taken when a new church is organized is found in the Book of Church Order (BCO) 5-8 *"Do you, in reliance on God for strength, solemnly promise and covenant that you will walk together as an organized church, on the principles of the faith and order of the Presbyterian Church in America, and that you will be zealous and faithful in maintaining the purity and peace of the whole body?"*

We exist as believers, as a Church, the body of Christ, under the New Covenant in His blood. By His blood and sacrifice He has purchased us as His own. We acknowledge this in baptism as the name of our covenantal God is placed upon us, and we affirm and reaffirm this in the covenantal meal of communion. We recognize that we are not our own, that we have been bought with a price, the price of the blood of our Savior. With this great salvation come many covenantal obligations. In our membership vows we both embrace Christ and pledge ourselves to Him. BCO 58 states, "(All of) you being here present to make a public profession of faith, are to assent to the following declarations and promises, by which you enter into a solemn covenant with God and His Church."

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

By these vows we pledge ourselves to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. By these covenant vows we are established as a Church and as members of the Church. By these vows we commit ourselves to Christ and to His Church as the context in which our lives as Christians are lived out. In vows four and five we pledge ourselves to Christ's bride, the Church. We are moved to do so by a true knowledge of and experience of the mercy of God showered upon us in Christ. The believer's life and commitment to Christ cannot be separated from the Church, His body, His bride.

The authority of Christ ruling and governing, overseeing and caring for His Church is exercised by a counsel of elders. This is clearly the case in the Church of the New Testament (Acts 15,20; Titus 1; 1 Timothy 3). Hebrews 13:17 both establishes the responsibility of the leaders to watch over the flock, and the responsibility of the flock to obey the leaders. Thus when the elders, under the authority of Christ, sit down to consider how to best order the affairs of the Church so that the purposes of Christ will be realized in the lives of those entrusted to them, there is a covenantal obligation on the part of the members of the Church to follow their leaders. This is the essence of the fourth and fifth membership vows.

Of course, the leaders of the church cannot bind the consciences of God's people with anything that is contrary to Scripture or beside it. Christian liberty and liberty of conscience is an important teaching of the Scriptures. It is characteristic of cults that they impose extra-scriptural rules on their membership. The WCF XX.2 states, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship."

However, the elders of the church do have the responsibility and authority to lead God's people in ministry, and the congregation is exhorted to follow their leaders in matters having to do with service and worship on the Lord's Day. Thus when the elders determine that Lord's Day worship is to take place morning and evening the fourth and fifth membership vows urge attendance. When the elders set up a course of study on the Lord's Day for believers to learn more of Christ and His Word the fourth and fifth membership vows bid us to attend. When the elders, exercising the authority of Christ, seek to assist parents in the rearing of their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord by providing special instruction on the Lord's Day, retaining the services of someone to assist our older youth and committing tithes and offerings to that end, the fourth and fifth membership vows bid us to take advantage of these opportunities. This is incumbent not only of the parents, but also of the older children who have taken these vows for themselves at the time of their admission to the Lord's Table.

Are we covenanted together with the Lord and with one another to walk together as a body of believers? Are we supporting and encouraging one another by faithfully supporting the work and worship of the Church to the best of our ability? Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I faithfully attend the worship services on the Lord's Day?
2. Do I attend the Education Hour classes and Sunday School classes on the Lord's Day?
3. Do I engage myself in prayer for the ministries of the Church and for my fellow believers?
4. Am I faithfully giving the tithe and offerings to support the advance of Christ's cause through the ministry of His Church?
5. Am I faithfully attending the monthly Fellowship Group meals?
6. Are my children involved in the life of the Church: Sunday School classes, etc. Are my older children being taught to take their vows seriously as they are admitted to the Lord's Table? (They will take their cue from their parents as to how seriously these vows are to be taken.)
7. Do I seek to involve my children in the special opportunities for spiritual growth that take place on occasion?
8. Do I look at Men's Fellowships, Women's Fellowships, Missions Conferences, special weekend conferences, etc. as opportunities to grow spiritually, engage others in ministry, and expose others to the Gospel? Do I view these events planned by the elders as important opportunities, etc.?

May we be so overwhelmed by God's mercy to us in Jesus that we eagerly and voluntarily present ourselves as living sacrifices unto our God, serving Him and each other in the life and ministry of the church, the body of Christ!