

# Obedience the Organ of Knowledge

Hugh Ross Mackintosh \*

1924

113

“If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God, or whether I speak from myself.”—St. John vii. 17.

CHRIST spoke these words in reply to a bewildered question. He had evidently mystified the Jewish leaders by the insight with which He was accustomed to treat of the religious problems brought to Him. That was a field they had come to look on as a private preserve of their own, and to hear this Galilean stranger, who could boast none of the advantages of expert training, speak with obvious mastery, filled them with wonder. In meeting

---

\*“Obedience the Organ of Knowledge,” in *Sermons* by Hugh Ross Mackintosh, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1938, pp. 113–122. This version updated June 2, 2017.

their perplexity, Jesus pointed out two things: first, that His wisdom came to Him from a higher source, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His that sent Me." And secondly, that the truth of this claim on His part they could each of them verify for themselves, "If any man willeth to do the Father's will, he shall know." In short, we have here the answer given by Jesus to the question which every earnest mind, no matter in what age or country, is bound to ask: How can we be quite certain that the Christian Gospel is true?

One word only on the precise language of our text. The Revisers have made an important change by altering what looked like a mere future tense into a much more forcible as well as a much more accurate expression. Instead of "If any man *will* do His will," which slurred over a distinct point, you now have "If any man *willeth* to do His will." The stress, as Christ placed it, is manifestly on the will—the voluntary, choosing side of our nature. And what He affirms is this, that the direction of a man's will fixes his capacity to know truth about God, and his actual knowledge of it. Let us look into this for a few moments.

114

1. Observe *the place of the will in religious life*. When we put aside generalities and seek precision, what is a man's will? Is it something more than half outside him, a mere piece of property or appendage—like his house or his tools? Is it something that he has, or is it not rather something that he is? I think there will be general agreement in saying there is nothing in us or about us that is

so particularly felt to be our very self, the inmost secret and spring of personality, as our will. That is simply the self or soul in its character of desire, movement, decision, action; it is the human being himself reaching out to a chosen object. Ideals we conceive by thought or imagination, but it is by will that we realise them; and just as a river betrays the course it has followed by the soils that mingle with, and colour, its waters, so by the complexion of any given human life you can judge of the ideals and ambitions that have gone to shape it, and, through will, have stamped on it; an individual mark.

What the will does, accordingly, is to seize upon ideals, high, low, or indifferent, and strive to give them outward expression. It insists that the world outside shall conform to its purpose. Now that is the reason why science so jealously guards itself against the intrusion of the will. Let it be seen that a man's wishes or prejudices are dictating his scientific results—that he is finding in his test-tube what he wants to find, or seeing through the eye-piece Of his microscope what he wants to see—and then for genuine research his conclusions are all worthless. Science has no use for him. He has allowed will to distort his vision. And the introduction of private wishes, preferences, prepossessions—that for science is the unpardonable sin.

115

Note one direct inference from this. Character is just the habitual set of the will, and if will must be kept out of research, it follows that a good many branches of knowledge have no vital connection with character.

Classical study, mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, and theology—in any of these, or a host of others, a bad man might do first-rate work. He might, score success quite irrespectively of the life he was living. A drunkard might do brilliantly in physics; a profligate in history; a thief in theology. Everybody knows that. There is a kind of knowledge, in short, which may be gained altogether independently of the man's deepest moral purpose.

We have to keep our wishes out of science—yes, but consider how the situation changes instantly when we are dealing with persons and endeavouring to know them as friends. There, a cold exclusion of wishes and desires is the very way to defeat our aim. We cannot get close to people in goodwill and love except as we *want* to find them worthy to, be loved. Friendship is impossible on any other terms. Your will *must* come in here. As it was put the other day: "Few people would consider it immoral in any one whose friend was accused of something disgraceful, if he approached the examination of the facts with the wish to find one alternative true rather than the other. It is only required of him not to falsify what, he finds."

Well, friendship and religion are very similar things; they are always casting light on each other. As in friendship, go in spiritual life, everything depends on a man's moral attitude. To know in this region our will must, be set obedience. We must have made up our mind for righteousness. In scientific investigation the watchword is, "Be impartial." In religion it is the very oppo-

site, "Cease to be impartial in these great moral issues, choose your side; stand for goodness; only so can you fight your way through to truth." As Browning says the inquirer about faith:

116

"Like you this Christianity or not?  
It may be false, but will you wish it true?  
Has it your vote to be so if it can?"

Suppose yourself in a grave of moral perplexity: would you go for help to a man who boasted that for him the distinction Of right and wrong had no existence? No; inevitably you would say, This man on one side of his nature is blind; he cannot see, how then should he help me to see? Just so the truth brought by Jesus Christ is hidden—it *must* be hidden—from the man who has no prejudice in favour of kindness, purity, rectitude, the will of God. Through loyalty on to light—that is the great principle for all who are steering forward through the mists of doubt.

The importance of the will in religion, then, is manifest. Also, we can discern the reason why. It is because religion is not mere obedience to a law, not even the bare following of an example, though it includes that; it is a personal fellowship. And the point where persons meet and join is will. You may think as another thinks, but similarity of opinion does not make you one with him. You and he are one solely when you will what he wills, and because he wills it, and when his deserved influence over you and within you is supplying the ac-

tive impulse. The secret, therefore, of discovering who Christ is, and what He means for men, lies in submitting our wills to His direction. You cannot see the beauty or the sense of the cathedral window from without; to behold the splendour and the miracle you must stoop and enter.

2. *What kind of knowledge does obedience yield? In what sense is the secret of the Lord with them that fear Him ?*

117

Plainly enough we cannot hope for an easy solution, along the line I have been indicating, of many of those problems concerning God and His government of the world that have always clustered about the onward pathway of mankind, and never more than to-day. Now, in certain moods or at certain periods of life, these inevitable questions rise up; and they not only disturb our minds, they charm them. Who has not known the pleasures of free discussion, the piquant statement of theories and their refutation, the give and take of intellectual play and fence? It is captivating; it is exciting; and occasionally we are tempted to carry the same method into personal religion. We sharpen our wits on the Christian doctrines; we turn the world of faith into a sort of mental gymnasium fitted with this apparatus of difficulties for the bracing of the sinews of the mind. But I ask: Can we expect to win the truth of God by an intellectual rush of that sort? Can we even expect that loyal obedience will unlock *every* problem ? Does fidelity to Christ solve all the enigmas of human

life?

Not directly, at any rate. There is no short-cut to the solution of age-long problems to be taken ready-made even by the thoroughfare of the truest-hearted obedience. The Gospel does not spare us the necessity of doing our level best with our mental powers, our gifts of analysis and reflection; no, and it does not, guarantee success in solving enigmas even when our best has been done. But it does something far, far better. It puts us where we can live in fellowship with God despite the multitude of problems that have to be left unsolved.

The truth is, there are questions about God, about His rule of the world, which a Christian can no more answer than anyone else. Take a controversy that shook Christendom more than three centuries ago—that between Calvinists and their opponents. One side held that in salvation God acts and acts alone, the other side argued that you must allow not merely for the sovereign power of God but for the independent operation of the human will. It was a historic contest, a mighty problem; but the fact that a man was a Christian did not of itself enable him to solve it infallibly. There were Christians on both sides; each party to the controversy was sure of being right. Or take the question of Evolution, as Darwin raised it eighty years ago. People were suddenly confronted with the question how we ought to conceive of the origin of animal species—whether by a Divine fiat producing all the varied forms of life simultaneously or by the gradual age-long development of all out of sim-

ple primeval germs. Did man's Christianity give him the insight to decide between the two? Notoriously it did not; once again there were Christians on both sides. And go we get back to the truth I am illustrating: personal obedience provides no easy key to many difficulties about God and man and the world.

Where then lie the richness and the wonder of Jesus' promise here? What does He mean by undertaking that the man who loves God's will shall know? What kind of problem *does* obedience solve? We can put it quite shortly—it is the question of the love of God; it is the question whether Christ is mighty to save. Can Jesus bring me into fellowship with the Father and with other men? Can He create the overcoming faith within my soul? Can He assure me that my sins are forgiven? Can He enable me to lead the life that, is life indeed Everything hangs on that, and that is the question which the man bent on doing God's will *can* have answered with absolute certitude. Jesus Himself lived unbrokenly in union and communion with the Father, and the man who hungers and thirsts after righteousness He can also guide into something of that experience.

119 Look at the matter from the other side. Here are the Gospels, the story Of Jesus' career, the picture of His character, and all that happened to Him; put them in the hand of a frankly selfish worldling, and he will only be mystified. He cannot see what Christ is for. He cannot believe that Christ is of any use to him. It does not dawn on him that in this Man the Father Himself is stooping



down to bless and save us. Why? Because to the eye dulled with sloth or pride or lust these things are invisible. Such a mind, as long as it remains so, sees no more, to use a terrible analogy, than a dog in a picture-gallery. But the man in earnest about living right makes the discovery. It comes home to him, instantly or by degrees, that here in Jesus the love, the gracious friendship of God is seeking him out and soliciting his trust, to help him inwardly to love and do that will which he has been endeavouring to obey, but with constant shame and failure. His heart has been made ready for Christ by learning that even an earnest purpose does not take him all the way. Morality by itself does not save. What it does rather is to lead us to a point at which we perceive once for all our desperate need for Christ's power, and where too we can see that power coming forth to heal and bless us.

Then another supreme truth to which obedience opens our eyes is the working of God in our own lives. We begin to trace the gold thread of God's purpose through all our experience. The man who has no wish to do God's will can never catch sight of the great stream of Providential movement, either in his personal career or in the wider world. sees nothing great anywhere, nothing noble, nothing eternal, nothing worth living for, nothing worth dying for. But he whose eyes are cleansed by the purpose to obey knows there are eternal things, and therefore Divine purpose everywhere, if only we have chosen the true angle from which they

120 can be seen. There are colours in nature the human eye is blind to, and sounds in nature too high and fine for our hearing; so too there is a way of understanding life which is only possible for those who love the will of God. Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge, A new sense and meaning steal into even the darkest facts—trial, frustration, delay, ignorance, even death itself—for the man in sympathy with God.

You know how it is often assumed that we are all equally ignorant of life's meaning, the Christian just as much as his neighbour. Was that Christ's thought of His followers' position? On the contrary He said they would know—and they *do* know everything that really matters. Remember there is a vast difference between being quite sure you know the final aim of a plan and pretending to have insight into all its details. A little child may be very ignorant of many particulars of her father's life—how he makes his income, his political sympathies, the clubs he belongs to, and so forth—and yet she may know *him*, his loving heart, perfectly, and all that counts for their life together. So a Christian is quite content that mysteries all round him should remain mysteries simply because in Jesus Christ he has seen the brightness of God's face.

Is it not uplifting to consider how God has made the deepest, the loftiest knowledge of all to be thus free to every honest seeker, without money and without price? All round us are these obedient loyal hearts, in every village, in every city street, who have never studied science

or learning, but who in Christ have become the chosen friends of God. "Their heart is at the secret source of every precious thing." Even now they are at home with God, for they have understood what He is doing with this unfinished world; they are toiling quietly to have His will accomplished. Is there one of us who would not pray: "When time is over, when each goes to his own place, may my soul be with theirs"?

3. We learn here *who is the proper judge of Christianity*. A widespread assumption, especially perhaps in Scotland where so often we appear to ourselves to be a nation of philosophers and theologians, is that in religion every man's judgment is as good as his neighbour's. No one dreams of holding that everybody has an equal right to his opinion, say, about astronomy; it is conceded that certain people, like Newton and Einstein, have familiarised themselves with that subject, and may well be listened to, But Christianity has a look of being different—as if no preparation were needed here, no training, no discipline, no experience. Let the question arise, Who is Jesus Christ? What can He do for men? and instantly all sorts and conditions of men pronounce upon it freely. Selfish greed not regarded as a disqualification for insight, or absorbing vanity, or a love of evil pleasure. All the world will give their opinion readily; they have settled the question long ago.

Therefore if you are not a Christian, and are gathering information on the subject, where are you going for your facts? Is it by any chance to Christ's enemies,

not His friends? Are the books we read about Him those which tear Him in pieces? And is that reasonable? Should we follow that plan in any other field? Shall I put the poems of Milton, or of Wordsworth, in the hands of a man who knows no English, and inquire anxiously for his opinion?

The truth is, you and I have the right to pass judgment on Jesus Christ only if, as honest and sincere men, we are doing our best to follow His steps and to obey the will Of that God in whose name He spoke. And even so we are not fit judges of Christ at every moment, but only in our highest hours. Listen to your heart when it fills with the impulse of sacrifice, or utters itself in prayer; and mark closely at such times how all that is within you speaks out on His behalf. It is when the tides of the spirit rise, when in silence there sweeps through our being the assurance that we have been made for eternal things—it is then that the case for Jesus becomes overwhelming. Give your nature its own way when its instincts are reaching out for God, and by all the laws that make it what it is, by the promise of Him for whom it has been created, you will be led into light. “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

122

Almighty God, Who hast given us the light of Christ to shine upon our darkness, grant, we pray Thee, that having our hearts fixed upon the things that cannot be shaken, we may move steadfastly, in trust and

without fear, through this perplexing world,  
and may be guides to those whose feet are  
stumbling in the way. And this we beg for  
Thy name's sake.