

# The Obedience Trap

By Barrington H. Brennen, MA, NCP, August 10, 2005

A few years ago I read a story of a little boy who was injured in an accident simply because he did not obey his mother. Here's the story. "One day his mom told him to tie his shoes before he went outside to play. The boy ignored his mother's request and ran outside. He saw his friend across the street and ran across the street to meet him. But when he was crossing the street, he tripped over his shoe lace and got hit by a car. The moral of the story is that obedience is mandatory."

Is obedience truly mandatory? The answer is unequivocally, yes. However, before you hasten to clap your hands, it is my opinion that the kind of obedience that is "mandatory" is not the kind many of us are thinking about. If "mandatory" means that parents must "teach" their children to obey and pastors "will teach" their congregants how to obey God, then that "mandatory obedience" is good. Note that the key word in these sentences is "teach." On the other hand, if "mandatory obedience" is force or coercion, then it is not good. It is my opinion that if children, employees, or parishioners are simply told to or required to obey to live up to what someone else considers what is right, then eventually these persons will eventually feel trapped in a vicious cycle of pleasing leaders, feelings of despair, confusion and guilt. The end results will be unhappy children, congregants, employees and citizens.

## WHAT IS OBEDIENCE?

The kind of obedience I am proposing in this article that always reaps positive results is "Godly obedience" or "transformational obedience." Transformational obedience implies that there is something more to obedience than the giving of instruction or informing others what to do. It suggests that Godly or transformational obedience is freedom and not restriction. The meaning will unfold as we dissect the word "obey."

There are three kinds of obedience:

1. Compliance or raw obedience
2. Conformity
3. Transformation

### 1. Compliance (I call this **RAW obedience**):

This is doing something simply because someone asks you to do it. You may not understand or agree, but you do it because you were requested to. In fact you are not asked to agree. Many parents, sad to say, often use this kind of obedience. They asked their children to do things and the children must do it simply because their parents asked them to do so, and nothing more. No explanation and discussion. They want their children to comply. This is mistakenly thought of as Godly obedience. This is the kind of obedience that leads to frustration, discontentment, heated family arguments, rebellion, and too often abuse.

### 2. Conformity:

This is pressure to go along or to conform to group expectation. There is no pressure in the form of verbal demands from people around you. Conformity is pressure from within to change to be accepted by others or do things that you would not normally do. The Bible speaks directly to the avoidance of this kind of obedience in Romans 12:2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will." *The New Living Translation*

This passage of scripture introduces a few important concepts about obedience. There is the concept of renewal or change which can only occur through thought processes and reasoning which is the ability to think and understand through questioning. This leads to the third type of obedience I call "transformation."

### 3. Transformation:

Transformational obedience is best understood by the meaning of the Greek work used for "transform" or "metamorphosis." Metamorphosis is the description of the process of a caterpillar changing to a butterfly. For this drastic change to occur, there has to be an internal transformation. Organs, systems, and structures, gradually transform from within until there is a beautiful butterfly, a completely different creature. Similarly, transformational obedience is the process that facilitates change from within. If one is forced to comply, internal change is most difficult.

To explain how this works it is imperative to understand that "transformational obedience" has three components.

1. **It is Understandable or Reasonable.** When a parent, teacher, employee, or pastor gives instructions or teachings, these should be easy to understand and reasonable. Sometimes parents make demands that are unreasonable and very difficult to understand. Then they get upset when the child asks questions. For transformational obedience to take place, the recipient of the information must be able to ask questions and have them clarified by the one making the requests. What about little children? Should they be allowed to ask questions? Remember, you want to help your children become self-governed and independent thinkers. Just making demands and expecting a blind response does not create thinkers. It encourages intellectual laziness and rebellion. A small child can learn to do something simply because you ask her to, but the parent's attitude should be that, as the child grows, he will be taught to understand what is being asked of him. This will be made possible through the systematic process of teaching which involves memorization, critical thinking, analyzing, and applying.

Ellen G. White, the world best non-academic psychologist and inspired writer said more than one hundred years ago in her book, Child Guidance, that "One of the first lessons a child needs to learn is the lesson of obedience. Before he is old enough to reason, he may be taught to obey. By gentle, persistent effort, the habit should be established . . . The object of discipline is the training of the child for self-government. He should be taught self-reliance and self-control. **Therefore as soon as he is capable of understanding, his reason should be enlisted on the side of obedience.**" Parents are not to wait until the child is older (a teenager) to reason with her. As soon as she is able to ask questions, age-appropriate answers should be given. This will stimulate thinking and intellectual growth. Persons making the requests should ensure they are easy to understand. One educator states that the characteristics of good objective in teaching (and I would say in parenting) are that when instructions are given they should be: 1) Brief enough to be remembered. 2) Clear enough to be written down. 3) Specific enough to be achieved. 4) Flexible enough to allow for changes in the teaching situation. 5) Made in terms of the student's (child's or employee's) behavior.

2. **Empowerment.** Transformational obedience is not only understandable, but the teacher/parent empowers the student/child to obey by listening, respecting, and believing in the person. Note that

obedience itself does not empower, but the empowerment comes from an outside source. For the little child, it comes from the parent or guardian. For the employee, it comes from the employer. For the student, it comes from the teacher. For the Christian in his or her spiritual growth, it comes from God. This is why I've said in previous articles that "rules without relationships breed chaos." Dr. Martin Luther said "those we must change we must first love." The child, student, or employee would want to change or "obey" because he feels he is being respected and valued as a worthwhile human being. In the Christian life, God would not ask us to obey without supplying us with the power to do so. **Romans 1:16** says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: For it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

3. **Transformation.** As a result of the reasoning and empowering, **transformation** is inevitable. Change will take place. This is the bi-product of effective teaching, grace-centered parenting, and leadership. The results are amazing when those in authority (parents to community leaders) understand these principles. The change is from indolence to productivity, rebellion to discipleship, violence to non-violence. In the growing child, transformational obedience is preventative medicine. It is the proactive method of effective parenting that produces outstanding citizens. It occurs when parents understand the importance of giving clear instruction, of encouraging questions, and of responding in a respectful manner.

## TO HEAR

In the Bible there is no separate word meaning "obey." "Obey" is translated in the Hebrew "to hear" more than 785 times. The word "hear" suggests that there is something more to obedience than the giving of instruction or the commanding of people. This is brought out clearly in Deuteronomy 11:18-21.

"18 So commit yourselves completely to these words of mine. Tie them to your hands as a reminder, and wear them on your forehead. 19 Teach them to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away on a journey, when you are lying down and when you are getting up again. 20 Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, 21 so that as long as the sky remains above the earth, you and your children may flourish in the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors. Be careful to obey (hear) all the commands I give you; show love to the LORD your God by walking in his ways and clinging to him."

Note that the teaching of the commandments involved using visual aids (writing them on the doorposts), repeating them until it becomes memory, modeling by the teacher (when you are walking and laying down), and at work. In other words, transformational or Godly obedience is a process and not an event called punishment. If these components are missing, the one being asked to obey will soon feel trapped. The results will be either unhappiness and depression or rebellion. Be a transforming leader today. **Barrington Brennen is a marriage and family therapist and a counseling psychologist. Send your question, comments or requests for counseling to P.O. Box N-896, Nassau, The Bahamas; or call 242-323-8772, or email [question@soencouragement.org](mailto:question@soencouragement.org), or visit the website [www.soencouragement.org](http://www.soencouragement.org) for this article and many more.**

