

CHAPTER IX

THE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST IN THE THEOLOGY
OF THE EARLY CHURCH

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A CARDINAL FEATURE IN THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION is the theme of the obedience of Christ. Many passages in the canonical Gospels and Epistles depict or allude to our Lord's obedient response to the Father's will. The Fourth Gospel, for example, portrays him as at every turn able to say, "I always do those things that please him";¹ and the writer to the Hebrews picks up the Psalmist's confession and writes it large over Jesus' entire ministry, "Lo, I come . . . to do your will, O God".² Yet the nouns "obedience" (*ὕπακοή*) and "obedient" (*ὕπηκος*) in description of Christ appear only three times in the New Testament and a mere handful of times in the extant literature of the earlier Fathers.³

It is the thesis of this brief article that by tracing out the occurrences of the nouns *ὕπακοή* and *ὕπηκος* with reference to Jesus Christ in the NT and the patristic materials of the first four centuries, interpreting them with regard to their respective contexts, and relating them to cognate expressions within their respective bodies of material, two matters in regard to the theme of the obedience of Christ in the theology of the early Church come to the fore. In the first place, the fulness of the Church's thought as to Christ's redemptive activity and person is better able to be appreciated. Secondly, something of the development of revelational and speculative understanding as to this theme within the early Church is exhibited: developing, I suggest, from an almost exclusive stress on Christ's "passive obedience" to a treatment that includes an emphasis upon his "active obedience" as well, then to considerations of his perfected filial obedience, and finally to discussions of the obedience of Christ which are set in contexts that are dominantly ontological in character. This is not to propose that the later developments entirely displaced the earlier stages. It is only to point out that there can be noted distinctive emphases as one

¹ Jn. 8:29; cf. 4:34, 5:30, 6:38.

² Heb. 10:7, quoting Ps. 40:7 f. (MT = 40:8 f.; LXX = 39:8 f.).

³ The nouns are also, of course, used with respect to Christians being obedient to God (e.g. Rom. 6:16 ff.; Acts 7:39), obedient to Christ (e.g., II Cor. 10:5), obedient to an apostle (II Cor. 2:9; Phlm. 21), and in a state of obedience (e.g., Rom. 15:18, 16:19; II Cor. 7:15, 10:6; I Pet. 1:2, 14). Likewise, the verb *ὕπακούω* appears a number of times in injunctions as to the proper response of believers.

moves through the various discussions of the obedience of Christ in the NT and the early patristic writings – emphases which serve to express something of the fulness of the early Church's understanding of the redemptive ministry of Christ, and which exhibit to some extent a development of thought from the more functional to the more ontological treatment of his work and person.

I *His Passive Obedience*

Possibly the earliest extant portion of Christian literature is the hymn of Phil. 2:6–11, incorporated by Paul into his exhortation to converts at Philippi.¹ Climaxing the first half of that hymn, and undoubtedly the focal point of its *katabasis* description, is the statement of 2:8: "He became obedient unto death" (*γενόμενος ὑπήκος μέχρι θανάτου*) – which, it seems, Paul highlighted by his own emotive interjection, "even death on a cross!" (*θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ*). The expression "did not snatch at equality with God" of v. 6 "contains a reminiscence of the First Adam, who, in disobedience to the Almighty, yielded to the temptation to 'be as God' (Gen. iii. 5)";² and the phrases "taking the form of a servant" of v. 7 and "unto death" of v. 8 set the hymn "in the context of the thought of fulfilment orientated to Is. 53".³ The recognition of such a context is important for the full explication of the varied nuances inherent in the statement "became obedient unto death". Significant for our purpose here, however, is the elemental fact that the theme of the obedience of Christ, in what is possibly the earliest extant portion of Christian literature, is expressed in terms of obedience "unto death" (*μέχρι θανάτου*). The hymn indeed begins by asserting that "the divine nature was his from the first" (NEB), but its emphasis in at least the *katabasis* section is on the functional aspects of Christ's humiliation and obedience – and in detailing that obedience, it lays almost exclusive emphasis upon Christ's death.

It is Christ's death, of course, that is the prominent factor in all of the NT discussions of man's redemption from sin and reconciliation to God.⁴ And throughout the New Testament, that death is portrayed both in terms of God's love and in terms of Christ's willing obedience – never

¹ On Phil. 2:6–11 as an early Christian hymn, see the seminal article by E. Lohmeyer, "Kyrios Jesus. Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2:5–11", *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften*, XVIII (1927–28), which was republished as a separate monograph in 1961 by Heidelberg Universitätsverlag. The most recent and exhaustive treatment of Phil. 2:6–11, with almost complete bibliographical data, can be found in the works of R. P. Martin, *An Early Christian Confession: Philipians II, 5–11 in Recent Interpretation* (London, 1960) and *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge, 1968).

² H. A. A. Kennedy, *The Theology of the Epistles* (London, 1919), p. 159.

³ G. Kittel, *TDNT*, I, p. 225.

⁴ Cf. J. Denney, *The Death of Christ* (London, 1902), *passim*; *idem*, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (London, 1917), pp. 233–85.

as an accident, a matter of logical necessity, or the culmination of some arbitrarily arranged plan. The Fourth Evangelist, for example, commenting on Jesus' words that the Son of Man must be "lifted up", explains: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son";¹ and Paul declared that "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us".² It was the Father's great love that motivated the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. But it was no less love on the part of the Son, as Paul, for example, points out in a number of intensely personal expressions: "Christ loved us and gave himself for us";³ "Christ loved the church and gave himself for her";⁴ "the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me".⁵ Likewise, that redemptive death was rooted in the willing obedience of Christ himself. He knew, at least from Caesarea Philippi on, what lay ahead in his earthly ministry,⁶ and he resolutely moved toward that climactic act with a willingness to accomplish the divine purpose.⁷ This is clearly intimated in such affirmations as: "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!"⁸ and, "I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This charge I received from my Father".⁹ There is never any suggestion in the NT accounts that the Father and the Son were in any way in opposition to each other in this regard, either in that the Son was wresting forgiveness from an unloving Father or that the Father was demanding a sacrifice from an unwilling Son. Divine love and willing obedience have been nowhere more in evidence than on that horrendous day at Calvary.

But love and obedience, apart from an existing need and an objective purpose, are concepts devoid of content. It is therefore necessary to ask regarding the need upon which that divine love was focused and the purpose for which Christ's obedience was expressed. One clue is supplied by Gal. 3:10-14, where Paul speaks of men being under condemnation and Christ having become a curse for us (*γενόμενος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν κατάρα*). Another is in Rom. 3:21-31, where the apostle portrays all men as sinners who fall short of God's glory and Jesus Christ as the "atoning sacrifice" (*ἱλαστήριον*) that fully satisfies the just demands of a holy and righteous God.¹⁰ In both passages, the dual features of man's desperate need and God's righteous justice come to the fore. In these passages, in fact, Paul has put his finger on two additional factors that motivated our Lord's crucifixion, and therefore it can be said that at the cross there was the convergence of (1) divine love, (2) divine justice, (3) Christ's willing and sacrificial obedience, and (4) man's desperate need.

¹ Jn. 3:16. ² Rom. 5:8. ³ Eph. 5:2. ⁴ Eph. 5:25. ⁵ Gal. 2:20.

⁶ Mk. 8:31 par., 10:45 par.; cf. 2:20 par.

⁷ Note the expression "he offered himself" of Heb. 9:14.

⁸ Lk. 12:50. ⁹ Jn. 10:17 f.

¹⁰ Cf. L. L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London, 1965), pp. 144-213.

This is what has been called by older theologians the "passive obedience" of Christ. In that act, God was proclaimed both "just and justifier" (*δικαιον και δικαιοῦντα*),¹ Christ expressed the epitome of filial obedience and culminated the work of redemption,² and the believer was declared free from condemnation and reconciled to God.³ It was the supreme act of love and obedience, which calls for – as Paul points out in his application of the Church's hymn in Philippians 2 – a similar response in the daily lives of those who have been so redeemed and reconciled.

II His Active Obedience

The theme of the obedience of Christ, however, while epitomized in our Lord's sacrificial death, is not exhausted in a consideration of that act. The declared purpose of Jesus included a fulfilling of all the obligations and demands of the Mosaic law.⁴ And Paul suggests this aspect of the redemptive ministry in Rom. 5:19, contrasting the disobedience of Adam with the obedience of Christ. Not only was "one man's trespass" countered by "one man's act of righteousness", as Rom. 5:18 declares with reference to his passive obedience, but "one man's disobedience" was rectified by "one man's obedience," as v. 19 goes on to say in regard to what theologians have called his "active obedience".⁵ In that active obedience, Christ stood in the place of humble submission to the Mosaic law and fulfilled all of its obligations, thereby presenting before the Father a positive righteousness for all who by faith take their stand "in him". "He was", as Karl Barth expressed it, "the only one who completely and genuinely stood in that place; he was *the Jew*".⁶ Or, as the apostle Paul

¹ Rom. 3:26.

² Note Jesus' cry, "It is finished!" (Jn. 19:30).

³ See Gal. 3:13 f.; II Cor. 5:21; Col. 1:20-22, 2:14 f.; Heb. 2:14 f.

⁴ Mt. 5:17 f.; cf. also 3:15. On *πληρῶσαι* in Mt. 5:17 as meaning "to consummate" or "fulfil by bearing the obligation of" the law, rather than "to confirm the validity of" the law (for which Paul used *ἱστανόμεν* in Rom. 3:31), see J. Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ* (London, 1949), p. 26; D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1956), pp. 60 f.; C. F. D. Moule, "Fulfillment-Words in the New Testament: Use and Abuse", *NTS*, 14 (1968), pp. 293-320. G. Vos was somewhat overly optimistic, but nonetheless quite right, when in 1926 he wrote: "It may now be considered as settled that the words 'not to destroy the law or the prophets' speak not of an idealizing perfection, but of an actual realization of the law in conduct. The context allows of no other exegesis" (*The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1956 repr.), p. 19).

⁵ Paul also suggests a broader understanding of Christ's redemptive activity in Rom. 5:10 – just nine verses earlier – when he says: "For if being enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more being reconciled we shall be saved by his life" (*σωθησόμεθα ἐν τῇ ζωῇ αὐτοῦ*). The phrase "by his life" certainly has reference to our Lord's risen life upon which the new life of the believer depends, as most commentators are quick to point out; but it may also include an allusion to his earthly life of obedience, which is presented to the Father on behalf of all who are Christ's and upon which the believer's positive righteousness before God depends.

⁶ K. Barth, *Christ and Adam* (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 33.

himself put it, he was "born of a woman, born under the law" – that is, truly human and bearing both the obligations and the curse of the law – "in order to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons".¹

Paul's thought also seems to run along this line in his use of the expression *ἐκ* or *διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*, which is usually taken as an objective genitive and translated "through faith in Jesus Christ". Of late, however, some interpreters have sought to understand Paul's thought here by reference to the usage of the Hebrew word *'emunah* in the OT and to suggest that just as *'emunah* meant both "faithfulness" and "faith", the former when ascribed to God and the latter with reference to man, so Paul employed *πίστις* and its adjective *πιστός* for both the divine faithfulness and man's response of faith.² While it is true that the apostle spoke and wrote Greek, his words were always coloured by their Hebrew associations. It is therefore likely that in certain instances in his letters the phrase *πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* should be understood as "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ", the God-man. And if this be true, it means that Paul thought of the believer's justification, righteousness and access before God as based upon Christ's perfect obedience during his earthly life to the will of God expressed in the Mosaic law, as well as his sacrifice on the cross.

This is not to say that in every Pauline instance of *πίστις* the idea of divine faithfulness is to be understood, for certainly *πίστις*, its adjective *πιστός*, and especially its verb *πιστεύω* often signify human trust and commitment.³ But it is to advocate that in the following verses, at least, the expression *πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* is best understood as "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ" through which comes righteousness and justification to all who respond by faith:

1. Rom. 3:22, "the righteousness of God [is manifested] through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (*διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*) to all who believe."

¹ Gal. 4:4 f. While Christ's bearing the curse of the law in his death is stressed in Gal. 3:10–14, in the context of Gal. 3:22–4:5 the expression "born under the law" suggests a broader reference: Christ's bearing the full obligation of the law, in life as well as in death, so that men may live as sons of God without being under that *παιδαγωγός* (3:24 f.) or subject to what Paul calls *τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* (4:3).

² Cf. A. G. Hebert, "Faithfulness and Faith", *Theology*, 58 (1955), pp. 373–79; T. F. Torrance, "One Aspect of the Biblical Conception of Faith", *ExpT*, 68 (1957), pp. 111–14; R. N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (New York, 1964), pp. 149–152. Conversely, see C. F. D. Moule, "The Biblical Conception of Faith", *ExpT*, 68 (1957), p. 157. Note, however, the pattern in Paul in this regard with reference to God: Rom. 3:3, "the faithfulness of God" (*τὴν πίστιν τοῦ θεοῦ*); 1 Cor. 1:9, 10:13, "God is faithful" (*πιστὸς ὁ θεός*); 1 Thess. 5:24, "faithful is the one who calls you" (*πιστὸς ὁ καλῶν ὑμᾶς*); and 2 Thess. 3:3, "the Lord is faithful" (*πιστὸς δὲ ἐστὶν ὁ κύριος*) – which pattern holds true as well in the LXX, the rest of the NT, and the writings of the Greek Fathers.

³ E.g., Rom. 4:14, 16; 1 Cor. 15:14, 17; 2 Cor. 1:24.

2. Gal. 2:16, "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Christ Jesus (*διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ*), even we have believed in Jesus Christ in order to be justified by the faithfulness of Christ" (*ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ*).

3. Gal. 3:22, "the scripture has consigned all things under sin in order that the promise which is based upon the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (*ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*) might be given to those who believe."

4. Phil. 3:9, "not having a righteousness of my own which is based on the law but that which is through the faithfulness of Christ (*διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ*), the righteousness of God that depends on faith".¹

5. Eph. 3:12, "in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through his faithfulness" (*διὰ τῆς πίστεως αὐτοῦ*).

And this may be the case as well in those very enigmatic expressions *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν* of Rom. 1:17 and *διὰ πίστεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* of 2 Tim. 3:15.

In 2 Cor. 1:20, the apostle presents Christ not only as the "Yes" from God but also as the believer's "Amen" to God: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God". In so saying, Paul suggests that Christ offered unto God the perfect response required of all men, but on behalf of all men. He accepted unto himself and completely fulfilled all that the law demanded in its requirements for righteousness. He stood for all men offering to a holy God the perfect righteousness required in the law, so that all who take their place "in Christ" stand before the Father clothed in his righteousness and not in their sins. It is his faithfulness to the will of God expressed in the Mosaic law that is accepted and that makes men righteous before the Father, not our own attempts to be righteous by means of some type of legal observance. As James Denney so aptly said: "It is the voice of God, no less than that of the sinner, which says, 'Thou, O Christ, art all I want; more than all in Thee I find'".²

The Christian, therefore, stands before God as the beneficiary of both Christ's passive obedience and Christ's active obedience. He is redeemed, uncondemned and reconciled because of the former; he is the possessor of a positive righteousness, justified and has access before the Father because of the latter. And because Christ has both redeemed from the curse of the law and perfectly met the obligations of the law for all who respond to him by faith, Paul can affirm that "Christ is the end (*τέλος*) of the law in its connexion with righteousness (*εἰς δικαιοσύνην*) to everyone who

¹ Note the redundancy that is set up in these first four verses when *πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* is treated as an objective genitive. When, however, the expression is understood as a subjective genitive with reference to our Lord's faithfulness in life to the will of God expressed in the Mosaic law, the dual factors of Christ's perfect obedience and man's response of faith are set forth.

² J. Denney, *Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pp. 162, 235, 301.

believes".¹ The obedience of Christ in his death and the obedience of Christ in his life are corollaries that can never truly be separated, for by means of both Christ has achieved man's complete reconciliation to a holy, righteous and loving God.

III *His Obedience Perfected*

The fact and effects of Christ's obedience are deeply rooted in the earliest strata of the Church's theology, both, as we have seen, in the hymnodic confession of Phil. 2:6-11 and in Paul's missionary preaching. And the themes enunciated in these more functional presentations of the redemptive message were carried on throughout the succeeding stages of Christian witness. Joined with this, however, is the more speculative approach to the subject that was inaugurated by the writer to the Hebrews in his declaration of Heb. 5:8-10: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered (*ἔμαθεν ἀφ' ὧν ἔπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν*), and once perfected (*τελειωθεὶς*), he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest, just like (*κατὰ τὴν τάξιν*) Melchizedek". That this reference to Christ's obedience being perfected during his earthly life is no inadvertence on the part of the author is evidenced by the fact that the same point appears in briefer form in Heb. 2:10, where it is said that "in bringing many sons to glory it was fitting that God . . . should make the Pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering" (*διὰ παθημάτων τελειῶσαι*), and Heb. 7:28, which speaks of "the Son, who has been made perfect forever" (*υἱὸν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τετελειωμένον*).

It may be rather startling at first to find in Hebrews such an emphasis upon Christ having "learned obedience" and become "perfected through suffering", particularly when one recalls the very high Christology expressed throughout the letter – even, perhaps, contradictory that "the Son" of Heb. 1:1-14 should have to learn obedience and become perfected. Yet however difficult it may be for us to comprehend the relationships between being and becoming in the life and ministry of our Lord, the writer to the Hebrews evidently felt no uneasiness about portraying Christ in terms of both status and process.² And we must not ignore either factor in seeking to protect the other.

The presentation in Hebrews of Christ's perfected obedience can hardly be taken to mean that our Lord's personal relation to the Father or his sonship were brought about by the things that he suffered, for chapter

one takes great pains to argue that Jesus is inherently and intrinsically the Son – even the One to whom the created works of God can rightly be ascribed.¹ And on its opening concessive clause ("although he was a son"), Heb. 5:8-10 begins on the premise that Christ's sonship is a fact apart from his sufferings. Nor can it be argued that Hebrews is teaching that in some manner our Lord gained by his experiences a moral perfection that was not his before. The letter introduces the Son as "the effulgence of God's glory and the express image of his being" (*ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ*),² and elsewhere speaks of Jesus being "without sin" (*χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας*)³ and without the need to offer sacrifices for his own sins in that he was "separate from sinners" (*κεχωρισμένος ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν*).⁴

What Hebrews has in mind when it speaks of process in our Lord's life and ministry concerns, evidently, not his relationship to the Father or his moral qualities but his redemptive capacity and work. Just as Peter proclaimed that God made (*ἐποίησεν*) Jesus both Lord and Messiah because of his resurrection,⁵ and Paul reported that Jesus was declared to be (*τοῦ ὀρισθέντος*) the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead,⁶ the writer to the Hebrews affirms that God designated him (*προσαγορευθεὶς ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ*) to be High Priest because of his sufferings. Likewise, because he was truly man and suffered as a man, he is able to empathise with men in their afflictions and "help those who are tempted" – evidently in a manner such as would not have been possible apart from his incarnation and human experiences.⁷ In view of the fact, therefore, that he is a high priest who by nature is the sinless Son of God and by experience is empathetic, the writer exhorts: "Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need".⁸

The discussion of the obedience of Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews is set in the context of ontological affirmations regarding Jesus' sonship and sinlessness as well as in the matrix of a functional portrayal of his priestly activities on behalf of men. Hebrews is not to be contrasted with earlier canonical writings in this interweaving of ontological and functional motifs, though it is distinctive in the emphasis it gives to the ontological and in its developed high priestly theme. Hebrews is unique, however, in its embryonic speculations about the relations between the ontological and the functional in the redemptive ministry of Christ, which come to expression in its speaking of a perfected obedience in the experience of Jesus. And it is this type of thought that became prominent in the writings of the Church Fathers, and has been dominant in dogmatic theology ever since.

¹ Rom. 10:4.

² Another explicit expression of this phenomenon is in Luke 1-2, where the loftiness of the Saviour's being is portrayed in many ways and yet the chapters conclude on a note of process and becoming: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (2:52).

¹ Heb. 1:4-14. ² Heb. 1:3. ³ Heb. 4:15. ⁴ Heb. 7:26 f.

⁵ Acts 2:36; cf. the similar emphasis in the *anabasis* section of the hymn of Phil. 2 (vv. 9-11).

⁶ Rom. 1:4. ⁷ Heb. 2:14-18. ⁸ Heb. 4:14-16.

IV *Obedience and Ontology*

The theme of the obedience of Christ, interestingly, does not come to explicit expression in the Church Fathers until the fourth century. And then it is associated very closely with the Christological debates that gave rise to and stemmed from the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. Clement of Alexandria in *The Educator* (c. A.D. 190) spoke of the Christian's obedience to *ὁ παιδαγωγὸς ἡμῶν Λόγος* (i.e., Christ) as follows:

First He persuades men to form habits of life, then He encourages them to fulfil their duties by laying down clear-cut counsels and by holding up, for us to follow, examples of those who have erred in the past. Both are most useful: the advice, that it may be obeyed; the other, given in the form of example, has a twofold object – either that we may choose the good and imitate it or condemn and avoid the bad.¹

And he further argued that “the inspired Word exists because of both obedience and disobedience: that we may be saved by obeying it, and educated because we have disobeyed”.² But Clement of Alexandria seems not to have spoken explicitly regarding Christ's own obedience, whether “passive”, “active”, or “perfected”. And while the Fathers who preceded and followed him in the Ante-Nicene period proclaimed, of course, the redemptive work of Christ, their extant writings give no indication that they expressed themselves in terms of the obedience of Christ.

It was Eusebius of Caesarea (died c. A.D. 370) who was the first patristic writer to refer explicitly to Christ's own obedience and to set the discussion in a thoroughly ontological context, speaking, as he did in the Ecclesiastical Theology (c. A.D. 336), of Christ's “voluntary and freely-given obedience” (*τὴν ἐξ ἀθεκουσίου προαιρέσεως ὑπακοήν*) which he will give to the Father.³ But it was with Eusebius' successor at Caesarea, the noble Cappadocian bishop Basil (died c. A.D. 379), and Basil's younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (died c. A.D. 394), that this theme in its ontological setting came most prominently to the fore. In opposition to Eunomius, who asserted in rather static fashion that his nature inevitably bound our Lord to a life of obedience, Basil of Caesarea argued that “by the incarnation, through his obedience (*μετὰ τὴν ἐνανθρώπησιν, διὰ τὴν ὑπακοήν*), the Father has bestowed upon the Son the name that is above all”;⁴ and, also opposed to Eunomius, Gregory of Nyssa insisted on the basis of the expression “became obedient” (*ὑπήκοος ἐγένετο*) of Phil. 2:8 that Christ was not compelled by his sonship to be obedient but

¹ *Paidagogos* I. 2.

² *Ibid.*, I. 5.

³ *Eccl. Theol.* III. (on I Cor. 15:28).

⁴ *Contra Eunomium* IV. 3

that his obedience sprang from a willing desire at a specific time in redemptive history.¹ The terms of reference in this debate as to whether Christ's obedience stemmed from his sonship and generation as “the Only-begotten God” (so Eunomius) or from his love, will and redemptive activity (so Basil and Gregory) may seem at times considerably confused. But the debate was fervent. And in its development, the theme of the obedience of Christ was treated in almost exclusively ontological fashion.

That this discussion of the ontological significance of Christ's obedience was no local matter among a certain select few is suggested by a Lenten Lecture on I Cor. 15:25–28 delivered by Cyril of Jerusalem (died c. A.D. 387). To those who argued from the statement, “he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (I Cor. 15:25), that Christ will reign no longer once his enemies have been subdued, Cyril responded: “For surely He who is King before He has subdued His enemies will be King after He has overcome them”; and to those who concluded from the statement, “when all things are made subject to him then the Son himself will also be made subject to him who subjected all things to him” (I Cor. 15:28), that the Son will be absorbed into the Father, Cyril argued: “Will all else that is subject to the Son abide, but the Son, subject to the Father not abide? He will be subject, not as though beginning to obey the Father (for from all eternity ‘he does always the things that please him’ [Jn. 8:29], but because then too He will tender not a forced obedience, but a self-chosen conformity (*ὑπακούει, οὐκ ἀναγκαστὴν ὑπακοήν ἔχων, ἀλλ’ αὐτοπροαίρετον εὐπέθειαν*). “For He is not a servant subject to necessity, but a Son, obeying from choice and affection”.² In addition, the longer Greek version of Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians, which in its spurious interpolations probably is to be dated in the latter part of the fourth century, likewise highlights the theme of Christ's obedience:

I have taken upon me first to exhort you that you run together in accordance with the will of God. For even Jesus Christ does all things according to the will of the Father, as He himself declares in a certain place, “I do always those things that please Him” (Jn. 8:29). Wherefore it behoves us also to live according to the will of God in Christ, and to imitate Him as Paul did. For, says he, “Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (I Cor. 11:1).³

Admittedly, neither *ὑπακοή* or *ὑπήκοος* appear in the wording of the passage, yet certainly something of the fourth-century discussion on the obedience of Christ is reflected in its expressions. So much so, in fact, did the fourth-century Fathers think and write of the obedience of Christ in an ontological context that Epiphanius of Constantia (i.e., Salamis) in Cyprus (died c. A.D. 403) employed the term almost as a Christological

¹ *Contra Eunomium* II, 11. and *passim*; cf. also Bk. I *passim*.

² *Catechesis* XV. 29 f. These sermons may have been given as early as A.D. 349. Cyril was resisted by Nicean theologians and is not often mentioned by the Fathers.

³ *Ad Eph.* 3.

title in declaring that "through the Virgin was begotten the obedience of grace" (*διὰ τῆς παρθένου γέγονεν ἡ ὑπακοή τῆς χάριτος*).¹

On the theme of the obedience of Christ, therefore, patristic writers of the fourth century picked up the embryonic ontological materials of the NT, but neglected in this particular form of expression the more functional features. The ontological developments were inevitable, and can only be judged on the basis of their continuity with the biblical data. The neglect of the more functional aspects – even though incorporated in other ways elsewhere in their respective systems of theology – may be viewed as regrettable, for fulness of doctrine is only attained as there is an explication that is both in continuity with the biblical data and in contact with all of the biblical data. In bringing together all of the biblical data on this one theme, however, and in tracing that theme through its various stages of discussion, something of both the fulness of doctrine on the obedience of Christ and its unfolding development in Christian understanding can be seen, which may serve to inform our more systematic theologies and our proclamation in regard to the redemptive work of Christ.

¹ Adver. Haer. LXXVIII. 18.