



OBEDIENCE

In terms of the religious exercises that we've been talking about, we have worked previously particularly in the whole area of meditation, contemplation, and prayer, that is, in the whole dimension of the solitaires of the spiritual: the solitary of the solitaires of the solitaires. Where we need to move now in terms of our conversation is to talk and think and work and struggle in the whole area of the corporates, the area of poverty, chastity, and obedience. To bring continuity, to bring consistency to all of those, I would want to include the categories of knowing, being, and doing, the journeys. Here we would talk about the whole area of knowing as including poverty and meditation. In terms of the journeys we would want to hold the area including chastity and contemplation with the category of being. In the area of obedience and prayer, we would particularly talk in terms of doing. These are master categories which define and enable me not only to understand what the corporates are about and what the solitaires are about, but to enable me to sense after how in the world the corporates and the solitaires relate to each other. The corporates fall particularly on the doing pole. The solitaires have to do with knowing, while the journeys would fall on the being pole.

The intensification of the corporates pushes into the solitaires. The intensification of poverty in terms of the knowing pushes into meditation. The intensification of chastity in terms of being pushes the bottom out in terms of contemplation. And to push obedience through to the very bottom in terms of the doing of doing is to find yourself precisely at the point of prayer.

Today, as I sense after the movement, our struggle is in this whole area of doing. The struggle in any course that we teach is this: let's get to the practice, let's get to the doing. For two years we have been just pushing to the bottom the religious dimension of life and getting the construct of the new religious mode charts before us, hammering that out in terms of practical nittygritty existence, not only in Chicago, but across the whole movement, across the whole world. Where we are today is taking these exercises, taking this which we know, and doing it. Where we are today is at the point of obedience. Maybe another way of saying that is that what the Research Assembly and Summer '70 are all about is obedience, about renewal of the Local Church. And that renewal, finally, if it is going to happen, will be centered in the whole area of obedience; it will be on the doing pole.

As you begin to reflect, you see that life itself begins with doing. There's the dirty diapers and the sucking of the bottle. There's learning to walk, learning to talk. But I do not want to talk about that kind of doing as obedience. Unselfconscious doing is not obedience. Obedience comes out of radical consciousness. Without that consciousness, there is no such thing as obedience. Obedience is on the other side of having transcended what you are doing. It's on the other side. It's having moved beyond just doing for the sake of doing.

I think of Buddha. There is a story that at one point in his life, he sensed and understood that there was no need to do anything anymore. There was no need to do anything, and he was ready to be taken into pure nirvana. It was at that point that he laid aside being taken into pure nirvana, for the sake of others, that they might know what he knew. For me, this is engagement. This is what obedience is all about. As long as anyone of us needs to be engaged, as long as anyone of us needs to be doing, we know not yet what obedience is. In obedience, engagement is the issue. But engagement for the sake of engagement is not engagement.

As I've been preparing this talk about obedience, I find myself wondering and thinking, "Why me? Why should I be the one who is doing this?" And I don't think it is just my sinful nature wondering why I'm here instead of someone else, but a genuine concern about what this says to me, and whether I know something about obedience that needs to be said to you. But what has come to me in terms of obediently preparing is that something strange happens when you begin to push in terms of what in the world it means to be an obedient one. Every one of us, you know, knows something about obedience. Every one of us finds himself engaged in a struggle about obedience.

There are the overobedient ones. Maybe those are the pharisees, and yet that word doesn't really hold it. There are those of us who struggle with doing whatever it is that comes along and consciously doing that, and yet at the same time having the gnawing sensation that there is something more to obedience. Obedience is more than just doing whatever comes along, more than just doing what is demanded.

Then there are the other ones of us who are underobedient. Maybe we need to talk about those as the libertines. The obedience comes along and a no is said to that. But it's not an unconscious no. It's an utterly conscious no that is said. Yet in the midst of that consciousness is again the nagging suspicion of needing to struggle with what is happening in my life in terms of obedience.

I would like to talk about obedience as being four is's. I'd say that first of all that obedience is covenant. Obedience is covenant. Where this first came to me was as a young boy. We used to do a lot of hitchhiking, before it was unsafe or dangerous to hitchhike. It was the only way to get around the area of the country I lived in. At the age of seven or eight years, I was usually out at some point of the week hitchhiking; and sometimes I'd come home and I'd not have gotten where I wanted to go or I would have stayed by the road for an hour, a little sevenyearold boy. I was selfconscious enough to know that adults are supposed to pity little sevenyearold boys out on the side of the road hitchhiking. I'd come home furious that I hadn't gotten where I'd wanted to go or that I'd only gotten halfway and gotten stuck and had to turn around and come back home. One time I told my father about that, and he just stopped me in the middle and said, "Who do you think you are? They don't owe you anything. They don't owe you anything." Suddenly obedience began to become clear to me in terms of being covenant, and not, as I reflected on that, as having to do with laws or rules.

Jesus was so clear on this. Whenever anybody would come up to him with one set or rules, why, he'd throw another one at them. Or if they'd come up with that one he'd contradict it with another. He was clear that obedience does not have to do with some set of rules. Rules are only tools that you and I have created in order to define certain arenas so that we at least stand a chance in terms of that battle. But that's not what obedience is about. Maybe the rules or the laws are ways that you and I have developed for getting off the hook. When an issue comes before us, in terms of a demand on our lives, why, we've got some neat little set of rules over here. Why, my goodness, you can't expect me to do that over there when I've got this to do over here. In terms of obedience being covenant, the first thing you understand is that no more than we have any claim on any other human being, you and I have no claim on God. We have no claim on God.

To say this another way, and I contradict myself it would seem, obedience is not doing in the ordinary sense of the word. It's not getting a job done. It's not how efficiently you can move in a certain area of life. Can you imagine in the covenant of your marriage, treating that covenant out of the understanding of obedience in terms of efficiency? And yet you go down to the drug store, and you can buy all kinds of books on how you can perform efficiently at that.

You understand the demonic death of understanding obedience as some kind of getting a job done or some kind of efficiency. Whenever somebody new begins to work with us, it doesn't take him long, as he looks at us, to see that there are a few things wrong. And in relatively short time, he begins to formulate, usually, some things that ought to be changed and begins talking to people about those things that ought to be changed. Usually after a month or two, he begins to doubt the wisdom of his ever having come in the first place. Well, I was going to say that the wise prior always looks in terms of obedience. What does the new person understand obedience to be about? In terms of the covenant, and in terms of obedience being covenant, only after you have understood what obedience is and have submitted are you ready to be the agent of change. Anyone who comes worrying about whether his opinions are going to be implemented.... Well, you begin to see that what you need to say is that that's not what this corporate group is about, and you need to go and find another.

I reflect again on my childhood. One of my tasks was always the cleaning of the chicken coop. Once a week the chicken coop needed to be cleaned, and as a young boy I understood that to be obedient was to get those chicken coops clean. But I understood that in terms of getting the job done, efficiency was what I was about. It was always a strange thing, that even after I got those chicken coops clean, my father came back and looking at the job, would call me to account. Not that it was done well or that it was done poorly, but he would call me to account in terms of what of myself I had invested in that job, what of my obedience was present. What I'm saying is that obedience as covenant is to be engaged. Not just to be involved and then to get out-obedience is to be engaged, and not in just a particular task, but it is to be engaged in every situation in which you find yourself. It is to be engaged in terms of totally giving.

I again find myself reflecting on marriage. What it means to be obedient in the covenant of marriage is not just to be obedient in the pleasant situations or in the tight moments. What it means to be obedient is to be obedient to the good and the bad. To the toying and the unloving. It means to be obedient to the right and to the wrong. Obedience, as covenant, has to do with the totality. You can see that a man or a woman who lives for himself can never be, or hope to be, obedient.

Obedience as covenant is radical. It's not a cause you join today and drop out of tomorrow, but as it were, you are elected. You are elected to obedience, and it is election to death itself. The way our fathers talked about obedience is that obedience is faith and faith is obedience. I'm never sure whether they tasked about it exactly that way, but they played those back and forth against one another. That obedience is faith and faith is obedience to life itself. Obedience is faith and faith is obedience to God. It is obedience to being. I can never quite fathom Abraham and the kind of demand that was upon him, his moving out, just out into a strange land, into the unknown, into the foreboding, into the foreboding. To be in covenant in obedience, to be engaged is always to be moving into the unknown, the radical unknown, into strange lands.

I want to say secondly that obedience has to do with transmoral affirmation. What I mean is that obedience does not have to do with moralism. It does not have to do with some shriveled piety about this or about that-about being nice. It has not to do with any moralistic rules out of which one person lives or does not live. What obedience has to do with, where it is grounded, is in the Word itself. Obedience finds its face in the Word that all that is good; and that all that I am is received; and that all the past is approved; and that all of the future is open. There is where obedience is grounded. The affirmation of obedience is not in some kind of morality, not in some kind of piety. Obedience finds its grounding in the Word, the Word in Jesus Christ. What that means in terms of transporting or moving beyond simple morality is that, first of all, you are just a fanatical lover of the world. To be the obedient one in affirming the world is to be one who has unmitigated concern. And I'm talking about the whole world. Not just the pleasant part, not just those parts where the grass grows; not just those parts where there is no disease. It is unmitigated concern, a fanatical love of the whole world. Where there is hatred, where there is peace, where there is war, where there is health, and where there is disease, where there is rot, and where there is healthy growth. In terms of its affirmation, obedience is affirmation of the whole world; and it means to love the whole world.

For me it has to do with passionate love of oneself. It has to do with passionately affirming the one that you are. It has to do with standing as the worthy one that you are, as the capable one that you are. I don't know how you experience it when a demand is made on your worthiness or a demand is made on your capability. I always find myself wanting to pass that off to someone else. Well, now, what it means to be the lover of yourself is to be the worthy one that you are, to be the capable one that you are. And it means to give yourself in terms of the demand that has come forth in any particular moment

I think of our work days here, those countless tasks that are demanded and put to the test each one of us, our worthiness, and our capacity. It calls in a peculiar way for our obedience. Just the task of having to clean somebody else's bathroom that you've never even been near or seen. It always comes to me as a very offensive kind of thing. And yet, what it means to love yourself is that when that demand is there, you move.

Or maybe the other way that you need to put it is that the affirmation of obedience is, finally, to love God. It is to be reconciled to Being Itself. It's not that you do obedience. Obedience is never something that you do. Whenever it becomes something that you do, it is just for the sake of yourself. It gets turned in and somehow becomes some sort of selfgratifying, selffeeding kind of sore, rather than being turned out. What obedience has to do with is being obedience, not doing obedience.

I think of the end of Salinger's book, Franny and Zooey, where he talks about Seymour shining his shoes for the fat lady. In terms of obedience, you see that what was demanded there was not something that you do. The shining of the shoes was not, finally, an act that you perform, but was a being that you were. Those shoes had to do with your being. To love God is to be obedient, and to obey his laws.

Obedience has to do with this affirmation. It also has to do with unrestrained engagement. It comes to me that, first of all (and this really feeds back to the previous point), the unrestrained engagement comes as saying yes. I think of Dag Hammarskjöld, who put this utterly secularly. He once wrote, "I don't know who or what put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to someone or something and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore my life in selfsurrender has a goal."

I find myself pushing back to the way Paul Tillich talks about radical, total, and unconditional in his sermon, "You Are Accepted." Obedience is something radical, total, and unconditional demanded of your life. And, "You are accepted." In other words, the total, the unconditional is to say yes-you say yes to total engagement in the whole ongoing civilizing process.

And that never comes easily. It comes as a happening. And it's just a sheer happening. You may remember that rich man who came up to Jesus and asked the question, "What do I need to do to have eternal life?" And you know how we get that story all messed up, implying that somehow if you have money in your hip pocket or if you have a bank account, then somehow you cannot possibly be a man of faith. For Jesus' response to him was, "Have you obeyed all the laws?" And he said, "Yes, I've done all that." And he goes on to ask him some more questions, and he says, "Is there anything else that I have to do?" And Jesus says, "Yes, there's one thing: go and sell everything that you have and then come back." And you remember how the story ended: he went off sadfaced. You see that that story is not about poverty.

It does not say that to be the man of faith you must be in poverty. What that story is about is surrendering. And whenever you surrender to unrestrained engagement, that comes as a radical happening.

This came for my wife and myself after we had been here a year. Actually it took us two years to make the decision. We had put all our possessions in storage in Phoenix, and we paid our monthly bill on that storage. Finally after two years we decided that the time had come to surrender. I tell you, it was heartwrenching to take our stuff out of storage and to put it out on the street. It was a street sale; they go big in Phoenix. And if any of you are thinking of doing this, people just come; and there go your wedding gifts, and there go your books, and there go... I tell you, to make that decision is a happening.

And everyone of us around here and across the movement already has the image of two suitcases, that what's demanded of our times is two suitcases, so that at any moment you can just pick up and go. And you see, that has nothing to do with the intrinsic value of having lots of possessions, or not having possessions. It has to do with surrender. It has to do with that surrender which is prerequisite to moving in terms of engagement.

Where that engagement takes place is always in a particular task; I find it rather easy to be obedient in the broad, but difficult to be obedient in the particular, to this person or this particular situation. For example, in these tactics sessions, I find doing this task of sitting in the room and filling in little boxes or writing sentences much more difficult than sitting in meetings and talking about how to do that. Have you experienced that? Unrestrained engagement, throwing yourself into that particular moment and giving yourself totally to that moment, is what it means to be obedient.

To assume and pick up responsibility for the whole would be the other way t would need to talk about unrestrained engagement. To be engaged is not only to pick up the particular moment, but it's to take up the whole. When we were in the East I found myself constantly running into people who knew clearly we were Americans, and in only a few moments they would begin to talk about what was going on in Asia. If the question would come: "Why are you doing this in Vietnam?" And I never said. My first response was always, "I'm not doing anything. I'm here on invitation of the Church in Malaysia and Singapore to help. I'm not doing that." But you see to be an American was to be: "Why are you doing this to us?" You don't even have to go to Malaysia if you're an American. You can just go to Windsor or Montreal or Toronto. You Canadians know. You begin to see that I am the United States and when the United States is right, I'm right. When the United States is wrong, I'm wrong. Maybe you begin to get a feel after my passion to get this nation right, because t am this nation.

Maybe another way to say that is that the one who understands that obedience has to do with unrestrained engagement is the one who understands that he lives without nobility. He gives without nobility, he lives without integrity, save the integrity demanded in the moment. Whatever is needed at that moment, you be it. In travelling around the country, you find that some of the deep frustration with our nation sometimes gets caricatured and focused on the President. Well, t tell you what it means to be unrestrainedly engaged without nobility is that if what the moment demands is that you love the President, well then you fight and die for him. If it demands that you hate him, it means that you go out and fight against him and seek to change that situation.

And you see the difficulty of the naive romanticist. One who is integrityhungry cannot possibly grasp this, for he is not concerned with the future generation, but with whether he wilt come off noble in the next encounter. But for the obedient one, engagement has to do with caring for human beings. It has to do with caring for others. Again, here in a facetoface encounter, it's not too terribly difficult to care for another human being. But when you blow that out to all men, to responsibility for the whose, you experience complexity upon complexity upon complexity, where you begin to see that the only thing left is to build structures. Across the world there are countless ones that are calling for the minds of men. And what we, who are those ones who affirm all being, must be about in terms of disengagement is building the kinds of structures and developing the kind of evangelical power necessary to call all human beings to be those who are obedient and who are affirming all, all being.

To love the other would be to talk in terms of obedience being destinal surrender. Obedience is destinal surrender. t don't know how you finally come to get at that kind of category. It comes to me in terms of moving through the covenant, affirmation, and engagement. But the surrender has to do with not just giving yourself, but giving the totality that is you. What that means for me is to begin to come into direct encounter with God. It is, as it were, to see the face of God. It is to touch the whitehot heat of Being Itself. I tell you, in obedience when the whitehot heat of Being Itself is touched what happens is that God himself is forced into a new stance.

Bonhoeffer talks about this one as being the man for others, and I think of Moses as being one of t~ose who was a man for others. He understood that what his life was about was living on behalf of all those that had gone before him and on behalf of all those who were to come after him. There he was in the desert with the little band of people who were saying, "It's pretty rough out here, Moses. I don't think we made a good decision. I think maybe we'd better head on back to Egypt. At least we had a roof over our head and we had a little food to eat. It wasn't the best, but it was better than this." And Moses goes off by himself, and at that moment of confrontation with God, in being obedient to God, you can almost hear him say: "God, we aren't going to make it. It doesn't look too good; we're not going to make it. We've got to have something more." "Get back there and lead those people, that's what's demanded." You know, what finally came out of that obedience to God was the great code of law that sustained the life of that community, not just through those forty years, but sustained

the life of that community through centuries, century upon century. The hand of God, as Moses moved in as the obedient one, was forced, and a new construct of humanness itself came into being.

I think of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, there at the point of the decision whether to go through with it or not. You almost hear him saying there in the garden, "Now what's the point of all this really? I'm only 33 years old, never been married, it's been a hard life. Now really what's the point of going off on some trumped up charge? I have a feeling what's going to happen." You can almost hear him saying to God, "Over my dead body I'll do this-over my dead body." Then he goes down and finds his followers asleep, and comes back up, and finally goes back down and gives his body. H. Richard Niehbur began to get a feel after this in his article on "The Church as Social Pioneer," where he said that God responds, that God responded in himself and history was different. You begin to see what obedience is about-that it's always about suffering. There's always suffering in obedience. The obedient one never sees the end of the road. He is one without a home, who has no country. It's always a fight, or, it's a sword that I bring. Obedience has to do with suffering.

The Israelites had a master image whereby they understood so clearly what it meant to be obedient to God. They understood that to be the obedient servant in the midst of humanness is to be the suffering servant. And that suffering goes on till death itself.

Yet on the other side of the suffering there's always the hope in the destinal surrender of the obedient one. I'm not talking about a naive optimism, but the hope of life itself. Noah, as he was building that silly boat, must have had that hope as his neighbors came by and looked at this boat that he was building while everything was looking great. Or Abraham and Sarah. That's ever more real to me. How many times in hope must they have gone to bed at night to conceive that child, to conceive that one manchild, till finally in obedience that child was conceived, when all others had said it can't be done. That is destinal surrender: the one in obedience is the hopeful one.

If you come back to the new religious mode charts, you see that when obedience is pushed to the bottom it comes down through prayer and finally ends up in the whole category of freedom. Obedience pushed to the bottom is prayer. And to come back to Bonhoeffer, obedience is that which delivers up to the human being freedom. And in many ways I suppose this whole lecture is a commentary on the one sentence that says something like this, "The obligation that alone gives freedom and gives entire freedom is the obligation to God and neighbor as they confront us in Jesus Christ."

I tell you that God has never stopped running history, and he surrenders not one ounce of his sovereignty to man. You almost have to say to yourself, "Freedom itself is commanded of me by God. Freedom itself is the command to be obeyed. My freedom is the command to be obeyed." My freedom makes history all right, but it makes the history God wants it to make. And the minute I get fed up with that humiliation, that my creativity does not get into history exactly the way I want it to, the moment I get fed up with that humiliation, not only am I no longer free, but I am no longer the obedient one. I am the slave in rebellion again. This is what is so hard to get expressed. In the midst of obedience, at the very bottom of being free is surrender. At the very bottom of being free is obedience.