

Is “Obligation” the Wrong Word?

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • October 2010

Terminology, along with titles and labels, are always difficult. Consider the well-used label “Christian.” I have been confronted at my front door by Mormon missionaries who started out by identifying themselves as “Christians,” only to have the same experience a few weeks later by people from the local Kingdom Hall (Jehovah Witness) who also identified themselves as “Christians.” Clearly neither of these door-to-door enthusiasts would have consider the other as Christians. And what is equally certain is that historical Christianity would never have defined either of these errant religious groups to be “Christians.” It seems quite certain that in many ways, the label “Christian” no longer serves a well-defined role in our English language.

But there are other factors that also work to round off the edges of words we use. I’m speaking of societal pressures and specifically the so-called political correctness which pervades our western world. Recently I’ve read some essays by Messianics who are troubled about our use of the word “obligation,” specifically when used to define our responsibilities as God’s covenant people. It has been suggested that when we speak of “Covenant Obligation,” we may unwittingly be placing too much emphasis upon what we *must* do rather than what we *want* to do; that using the term “Covenant Obligation” could morph our Torah-obedience into a begrudged assignment rather than a willing and joyful response of love to God. Or even worse, that using “Covenant Obligation” might send the message that we garner God’s love by keeping Torah rather than keeping Torah because we have experienced God’s love in the Messiah.

Indeed, in our times it is not uncommon to encounter the idea that “obligation” and “love” are, in some ways, mutually exclusive. Love, we are told, must be entirely voluntary if it is to be genuine, and that whenever obligation is imposed upon a relationship, it hampers rather than enhances the love by which that relationship exists.

I’m not surprised that our modern world defines the essential ingredient of love along the lines of self-determination. That fits very well with the self-centered ethos of the current *zeitgeist*. What puzzles me, however, is that Bible teachers would fall into this same line of thinking.

Consider, for instance, how the idea of loving God is coupled with fearing Him.

Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the LORD’S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? (Deut 10:12–13)

Indeed, very often the admonition to keep the commandments of God is paralleled with fearing Him:

Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever! (Deut 5:29)

Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. (Deut 8:6)

You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. (Deut 13:4)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do His commandments; His praise endures forever. (Ps 111:10)

(See also Deut 31:12; Josh 24:14; 1 Sam 12:14, 24; 2 Chr 19:9; Psa 25:12; 112:1; 128:1; Prov 14:2)

In fact, “the fear of the LORD” is used as a synonym for His commandments in Psalm 19:7–9. Note how the parallel terms all refer to God’s Torah:

The Torah (תּוֹרָה) of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony (עֲדוּת) of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts (פְּקוּדֵי) of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment (מִצְוָה) of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear (יִרְאַה) of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments (מִשְׁפָּטֵי) of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.

But what is the “fear of the LORD”? Is this synonymous with “reverence” or “high regard”? Does fearing the Lord mean acknowledging His supreme position as God? Yes, fearing the LORD includes all of these, but it is more. Fearing the Lord means recognizing and accepting His utter sovereignty, and knowing that rebellion against Him will bring His fatherly discipline: “Whom the Father loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights” (Prov 3:12, cp. Heb 12:6). This truth, that God’s love for us means He will discipline us when we disobey Him, is also a component of what it means to “fear the Lord.” While God’s discipline is a sign of His love for us, it is still painful. Indeed, sometimes the motivation needed to steer us away from sin is the desire to avoid the discipline that such sin would inevitably bring. This, too, is part of fearing the Lord.

Let me offer an illustration of this principle. Years ago I owned and operated a commercial printing business. In my small printshop we had a number of different printing presses, but the largest one was a six-ton Harris sheetfed offset press. The plate and blanket cylinders together weighed over a ton. Now this press could print 7000 sheets per hour, even though we usually ran it at 3000 to 4000 an hour. Still, this meant that the primary cylinders were humming away at high rpms. When I first had the press set up, the gentleman who did the set up was missing three fingers on his right hand. During our conversations, I inquired how he had been injured. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “In a press just like this one!” He then went on to explain that if ever I got my hand into those spinning cylinders, the press would not jam until it reached my shoulder. It left a sickening feeling in my stomach! As I operated that press day after day, and marveled at its precision to print a very fine image, I never forgot what that man had said. I depended upon the press to support the business, and I learned to operate it quickly and efficiently. But every time I loaded a new plate, or cleaned the blanket cylinder, I realized that if I were to put my hand there while the press was running, I would be injured for life. I came to understand that the precision of the press was directly related to its awesome power. Even though I grew in my appreciation for the engineering that went into this fine press, I never lost my fear of what that press could do to my hand and arm if I failed to operate it properly.

My point is that “fearing the Lord” includes the recognition of and appreciation for His awesome power and sovereignty. When, for instance, at the opening of our morning prayers, we recite Ps 69:14[13], “As for me, may my prayer to You Adonai, be at an acceptable time...,” we do so because we are reminding ourselves that in prayer we stand before the King of the universe only because we have been invited in to His throne room through His Son. In and of ourselves we have nothing by which to demand an audience with Him. So as invited guests we bow before Him, filled with the awe that His presence demands. Surely we come with confidence (Heb 4:16), but such confidence does not negate trembling at His word (Is 66:5). Indeed, we worship Him with fear, rejoicing before Him with trembling (Ps 2:11). So “fearing the Lord” involves some measure of trembling.

I’m not suggesting that such trembling forms the primary motivation for our obedience. Quite clearly our primary motivation for obeying God is because we have been overwhelmed by His love for us, demonstrated in His Son, Yeshua, and secured to us by the Holy Spirit Who now indwells us. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1Jn 4:19). But what I am saying is that in our struggle against the flesh, the knowledge that God disciplines

those He loves is one factor that adds proper motivation for obedience.

So what does “fearing the Lord” have to do with obligation? Simply this: obeying God is not an option for those who are His sons and daughters. The covenant sealed by the sacrifice of our Messiah includes both obligation and reward, and such obligation is happily received by all who are truly members of the covenant. Surely we *may* obey our Lord and we *should* obey Him, and we are *compelled to* obey Him by the urgings of the Spirit. But it is equally true that we *must* obey His commandments and we know that there are consequences if we disobey.

Attempts to soften the sharp edges of *must* or *obligation* may find safe lodging in modern, political correctness, but it is not so in the Scriptures. When Paul, for instance, wants to describe our state before and after being granted salvation by God’s grace, he uses the metaphor of a slave. Before we were saved, we were “slaves to sin” (Rom 6:6, 17, 20), and after we are saved we are “slaves to righteousness” (Rom 6:18–19). Paul’s use of the slave metaphor is insightful, because it negates the idea of self-determination. Before we were saved, we were slaves to sin, which means sin was our master. But after experiencing the newness of life in salvation, we are not free to do as we please. No, we remain slaves, but now we are “slaves to righteousness.” And the primary characteristic of a slave is that he or she is obligated to obey their master. They are not free to do otherwise.

What is more, contrary to modern thinking, obligation does not diminish love—it enhances it. This is because biblical love is not primarily characterized by feelings but by actions. Loving God means keeping His commandments: “... but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Ex 20:6, Deut 5:10); “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15). This is well illustrated in the command to husbands to love their wife (Eph 5:25). A husband who genuinely loves his wife finds this to be a pleasant duty, filled with companionship, romance, and happiness. But every husband faces times when his own selfishness gets in the way of loving his wife as he should. It is then that he must humble himself under the mighty hand of God, die to himself and set aside his own desires for the sake of the one he loves, even as Yeshua humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on an execution stake (Phil 2:5–8). There are times in a love relationship that we say “even though, in my flesh, I’d rather not, I have no choice. I *am under obligation to love* and I will.” Sometimes it is the necessity of love that urges us to do what we know we want to do, even though for the moment our self-centeredness rings loudly in our ears. And when we obey the divine commandment to love, we are personally fulfilled more than we could have imagined!

Nothing is more useless to a craftsman than a smooth file, for after its sharp edges are worn away, it cannot be sharpened and can no longer perform its function. Likewise, softening the sharp edges of terms like *must* and *obligation* could well result in a skewed understanding of important words like *commandment* and *covenant*. Our covenant relationship with God through His Son is neither entirely *obligation* nor *personally motivated desire*. It consists of both. We love Him freely because we have been given a new heart to do so. But we also war against the flesh, and reckoning ourselves to be “slaves of righteousness” is an important weapon in our spiritual arsenal to urge us forward in the battle.