A walk with Mr O (27)

Evangelical obedience

Mr O, while I was on holiday I went to a church where - three times in one sermon - the pastor mentioned 'evangelical obedience'.

That's wonderful! Hardly anyone talks about it these days.

That's certainly true, Mr O, because I have never heard the expression before. What on earth does it mean?

It's easy to explain. Let me use an illustration. In the sixteenth century an English explorer in South America came across a Spanish soldier who was mercilessly beating a slave. To save the poor man's life, the explorer intervened. He killed the soldier. He then told the slave that he was a free man.
The victim's reaction was to throw himself at the explorer's feet and to exclaim, 'Thank you! Thank you! I will now be your slave and I will serve you for ever.'

I think I'm getting the idea, but, to be sure, could you please explain all that to me?

The man was an unwilling slave, driven at best by duty, but mostly by fear. He then became a willing slave, overwhelmed by the kindness of his saviour and wanting to express his gratitude throughout every remaining moment of his life. Duty and fear were replaced by love.

I've got it! The 'evangel' in 'evangelical obedience' refers to the gospel – to the great saving fact of Christ's life, death and resurrection. We obey the Lord, not primarily out of duty, and certainly not out of fear, but because we want to say 'thank you' to Him who has so wonderfully saved us.

Exactly! Any obedience to the Lord which is not motivated by the thought of His cross is an 'obedience' which, frankly, is unchristian. It is lifeless legalism. It has nothing of Christ in it, nobody can keep it up, and God does not accept it. It's the old-fashioned nonsense of the Pharisees.

That's strong stuff, Mr O! Are you sure that you are not over-stating things?

Read your Bible and judge for yourself! Take 1 Corinthians, for example. Here the apostle Paul gives instructions about how to handle a whole host of problems in the Corinthian church – problems such as disunity, immorality, marital tension, differences of conscience, disorder in public worship, and heresy. He tackles every issue (without exception!) by showing how it is impacted by Christ and His cross. His whole letter is a call to 'evangelical obedience'.

'Think clearly about the cross and you will think clearly about everything else.' Is that what you are saying?

Yes, that's what the Bible teaches. And to put some flesh on it, let me give you a couple of up-to-date examples.

Jill, a Christian, is driving through town and notices that she is doing 35 mph. She slows down, 'because,' she says, 'that's the law; and besides, I might get a fine'. I'm not complaining about Jill's reasoning or her slowing down, but up to this point she is thinking no differently from a non-Christian.

Okay, but how should she be thinking?

All that, plus this: 'My Saviour sacrificed Himself for the good of others. For the same reason I should sacrifice some speed and reduce the risk of killing somebody.'

And what is your other example?

Well, some time ago I heard a lecture on spiritual abuse. The man of God who gave it showed us from Scripture how leaders should not coerce or bully people. His message was, basically, 'We must stop doing that and that and that; and instead, we must do this and this and this.' That was it, and he took an hour to say it.'

He never mentioned the cross once. Those who coerce and bully were told to repent, but were never directed to the blood of Calvary, to the forgiveness to be found there, and to how we can be changed for ever by realising that we have been crucified with Christ. What abusive leaders need is not a new code; it is a life lived at the cross.

The cross! The cross! It must be front and centre in our every thought.
The choice is always between being 'evangelical' and being wrong.