

The Necessity of Spiritual Independence and the Bible

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Human beings are a curious mixture. On one hand, we are social and operate in group ... yet, at the same time, each person is a uniquely solitary individual unit. It is important to understand what things are okay in group, but it is equally important to understand what things must be solo.

As Christians, we become part of a group - the body of Christ. Yet, we remain an individual. *“(Y)ou are Christ's body, and individually members of it.”* God not only places *“the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desire(s)”* but also grants spiritual gifts *“to each one individually just as He wills”* (1Cor 12:11,18 and 27). In this group, individuality is never lost. In fact, with imparted gifts it is enhanced as each part is now even more different than before one ever became a Christian in the first place! But, ... let's go back one more step.

The most important, the most crucial, indeed the most non-negotiable of all solo actions, centers on the salvation issue ... getting oneself in a right standing with God. This is a transaction *fully* between an individual and his/her Creator. It is the most solo of all activities. And it puts us in the weakest of positions because *“all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do”* (Heb 4:13). It is no wonder we hide *“in the trees”* like Adam - looking for cover (Gen 3:8). While individuals have sown all kinds of *“fig leaves together”* in the vain attempt to shield himself/herself from God (Gen 3:7), there is one design that is a bit ironic. A shield of choice for many is ... religion.

In this context, I want to discuss just the Christian religion.

The Christian Religion

In my mind, the Christian religion and the Christian faith are two different things. It is not imperative that you adopt my demarcation between the two, but if you think (for this moment) in the framework I am presenting, the following discussion will make more sense. When I think of religion, I think; *“ceremony, ritual, dogma - and the formulas for these things.”* When I think of faith, I think; *“inquiry, study, knowledge - and persuasion of what is true.”*

It is a natural weakness for man to fall into religion. The reason is really quite simple. Religion tells the follower everything he/she must do. The directives are not to be questioned in much depth - just obeyed - and everything will be fine. Many people feel they have actually accomplished something of true value to God by following the particular religious orders presented to them. Such actions often bring great comfort ... hence religion's appeal. But, that does not translate ... into life.

Using the definition for religion above, the Christian religion ... *is easy*. There is a *“formula”* for salvation - followed by clear directives for *“the good Christian life.”* Altar calls, confirmations, or baptisms are soon followed by church membership, tithing, and the church calendar.

The Christian religion is built upon two primary pillars. First, those in the pew *are sheep* who must be led. And the second pillar is (you guessed it) - the leaders. The sheep are to obey them.

Two huge blunders are created by this model. First, calling Christians *“sheep”* is a *“figure of speech”* - not to be overplayed (Jn 10:6). Sheep are portrayed as defenseless, naive and weak of mind ... some might even say stupid. But, where does Ezekiel's verse fit in the *“dumb sheep”* analogy? *“‘As for you, My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, you are men, and I am your God,’ declares the Lord”* (Ezek 34:31). This is consistent with Paul's admonition to the wayward Corinthians: *“in your thinking be mature ... Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong”* (1Cor 14:20 and 16:13). Where is it that God calls His children - to be stupid sheep? Incidentally, even in the *“figure of speech”*

given by Jesus, He said the sheep only respond to their master's trustworthy voice ... and pay no heed to a stranger's voice (Jn 10: 1-5,16,27). People would do well to imitate this as they often follow "*strange voices*" who lead them into death. So, who has more innate sense?

Secondly, the leaders of the Christian religion are exempted from this "*figure of speech*." They are over the dumb sheep. But, they themselves ... are not dumb sheep. One of the most oft quoted passages supporting this position comes from Hebrews: "*Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you*" (Heb 13:17). At first blush this confirms the religion model - sheep are to obey leaders. But, a short grammar lesson produces a different story.

This English *translation* from the Koine Greek contains at least **three** errors.

First error in the English translation: "**Obey** your leaders and submit to them ...". "*Obey*" is a verb in the *active* voice. But in Koine Greek, this verb is in the *passive* voice. The passive voice means the subject is acted upon - not doing the action. The word translated, "*obey*" is "*peitho*" and has several potential meanings. "*Peitho*" is a word built upon the concept of *persuasion* - not some unquestioned, blind assent. Also, this is not a middle deponent verb (to be translated active), so it escapes me as to why all the translations I have looked at insist on translating this passive verb in the active voice.

Second error in the English translation: "*Obey your **leaders** and submit to them ...*". "*Leaders*" is a *noun*. But, in the Koine Greek the word is a *participle* - not a noun. A participle is a verbal adjective. There is a huge difference between "*leaders*" (a noun) and "*the leading ones*" (a participle). In this instance, "*the leading ones*" refers to the more mature Christians "*of you all*" (a plural genitive). They seek to persuade the less mature by instruction and example - and call for imitation. "*Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ*" (1Cor 11:1). That was Paul calling to the extremely wayward Corinthians!

Third error in the English translation: "*Obey your leaders and submit **to them** ...*". "*to them*" is a prepositional phrase. This phrase - these words - are not in this Greek passage *at all* and should just be forgotten. The English is a total addition to the Greek text.

Hebrews 13:17 should be translated more like this: "*You must allow yourselves to be persuaded by the leading ones of you all ... and yield.*" The less mature are *commanded* to allow themselves "*to be persuaded*" (now the passive voice) by the more mature among them - and then yield to the accurate handling of the word of God (doctrine and lifestyle) - not some blind yielding "*to them.*" One is to yield to the correctness of the information. This is totally consistent with all the other foundational Biblical injunctions of the Christian faith. "*Examine everything; adhere to that which is good*" (1Thes 5:21). The Bereans "*were more noble minded than those in Thessalonica ... examining the Scriptures daily*" to see if Paul's assertions were correct (Acts 17:11). "*Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!*" (2Cor 13:5).

Those who "*are leading*" (a correct participle) must account for how they led. But, they are not responsible for subsequent wrong choices by their listeners. Paul was not guilty before God for the errant choices of the wayward Corinthians or the bewitched Galatians. Their choices did bring him grief ... *but not guilt*. By the way, Jesus did talk about "*leaders*" (noun) one time. "*Do not be called leaders; for One is your leader - Christ*" (Mt 23:10). This is foundational to the Christian faith.

I do not know why translators have so mangled this passage in Hebrews. If you can find a Greek scholar who can explain this - let me know.

The Christian Faith

Christian faith is the product of individual circumstances converging on a person - forcing an intense search ... for the Creator. While God may use people, or even some of the structures of religion as cited above in this production, these things are secondary (at best). The Christian faith is the search for God. “*As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God - for the living God*” (Ps 42:1,2). Furthermore, He tells us, “*You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart*” (Jer 29:13). This is hard. In fact, I don’t think we can really know when we have truly sought Him with all our heart. Duplicities, known and unknown, infest us. He alone determines if we have met this condition of searching for Him “*with all (our) heart*” - and we need His help to do this.

God calls individuals *individually* into the Christian faith. This automatically means there is a spiritual independence from any other person. No one can get into heaven on the coattails of another. Adhering to the greatest of preachers ... will not work. Supporting, or participating in, the most fruitful Christian church ... will not move God to accept that one. Even heart wrenching pleas to God by the most devout mother ... will not usher one into glory. There is but One Advocate before God the Father who can make a successful case for one’s inclusion into His favor (1Jn 2:1). And one must deal with Him solo. No endeavor we will ever undertake is more solo than this – or more necessary.

But, there are also things that happen to us that find us solo. For example, the emergencies of life ... we face alone. The only One who can help us - is God. When Stephen was being stoned to death, he needed Christian faith - not some version of the Christian religion (Acts 6 and 7). And all the members of even a faithful fellowship could not help him in the face of his emergency. Our exit will be different, but our need - at our departure - will be the same. The Christian faith includes, indeed is built upon, a vibrant spiritual *independence* from man ... with a total spiritual *dependence* upon Jesus Christ.

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