

‘All Greek To Me’ : Obedience

Πείθω *peithō* *pi'-tho*

Meaning: To convince, or be convinced.

Translated as: be persuaded, trust, win over, rely, be convinced, follow, take advice, urge, listen, obey, be confident, seek favour, be sure, assure.

ὑπακοή *hupakoē* *hoop-ak-o-ay'*

From: ὑπό *hupo* *hoop-o'* ‘under’ and ἀκούω *akouō* *ak-oo'-o* ‘to hear’

Meaning: Literally, *hearing under*, that is, *listening attentively*; by implication *heeding* or *conforming* to a command or authority.

Translated as: Obedience

Back in about 1985, we were part of one of the growing number of ‘house churches’ which had sprung up in the UK – fellowships of like-minded and mostly young-ish Christian believers who really wanted to grow together and discover more of God’s purposes for his Church. We had been involved for about 12 years. But now things were beginning to go wrong.

For all those years, we had responded to the leadership because we recognised that the Lord was leading them, but now we were being told that we needed to obey the leaders without question, even if we thought that they were wrong about something!

That did not ‘sit’ easily with us, and we said so. So one of the leaders came round to try to convince us, and the verse he majored on was **Hebrews 13:17** “*obey them that have the rule over you and submit to them*” (KJV). I was just beginning to discover a little New Testament Greek, and found out that this word (*peithō*) really meant ‘be persuaded’ and not ‘obey’! So the meaning of the verse was really “be persuaded by those that lead, guide and govern you . . .” – and we were not persuaded!

Perhaps he knew that he was on dodgy ground. I don’t remember any further attempts to bring us into line, though I did go to see the main leader to make sure that this was **really** what they had in mind. I was half expecting him to change back to what he had been teaching for years – responding to leadership because we recognised their ‘gifting’ – but no, this was the new ‘party line’. Sadly, we knew that this was the end of the road for us. We did not feel that we had left the fellowship; rather that they had left us!

We were sad but relieved to remove ourselves from the controlling culture which even expected people to consult their leader(s) before deciding to buy a new washing machine or anything like that. Phew! A narrow escape! We lost some friends, but certainly not all of them, as others also shared the same disquiet at the new emphasis. The circle of fellowship that had seemed so close began to disintegrate. Some people moved away from the area; after a few years, we did the same.

I now know that this word is translated as ‘obey’ in only 3 places in the New Testament, out of a total of 64! Those other two passages also make perfect sense if you use ‘persuade’ or ‘be persuaded’¹. All the remaining 61 emphasise trusting, being convinced, being sure, being confident and being persuaded.

But what about when Paul writes about ‘the obedience of faith’? ² He uses a completely different word, *hupakoē*, which really means ‘attentive hearkening’ and is consistently translated ‘obedience’ in all its 15 New Testament occurrences, along with the linked word *hupakouō* meaning ‘to hear attentively’, translated ‘obey’ or ‘become obedient’ in 21 out of its 23 occurrences.

¹ **Galatians 5:7** and **James 3:3**

² **Romans 1:5, 16:26**

But do we see what is going on here? Even this word, which really **does** mean ‘obey’, carries the need for response. Not a reaction of blindly ‘doing what we are told’ but a response of submitting to what we have been listening to attentively. It’s interactive, not like a military command.

This sort of obedience is a willing response of ‘Yes!’ to what is placed before us, and I love Paul’s use of the phrase ‘the obedience of faith’, because that is exactly what faith really is.

Let’s translate that jargon word ‘faith’ as well! Although it is sometimes used in a non-religious sense as well, it often seems to retain some religious overtones. The basic meaning is ‘trust’, and it’s always trust **in** something or, more usually, someone.

People may sometimes talk about ‘having faith’ as if that is something that stands on its own. But you can’t just ‘have trust’ on its own, it has to be trust **in** someone or something.

So now we come to see more of what Paul means by ‘the obedience of faith’ – a response of trust. Not a leap in the dark, not ‘blind faith’ at all, but saying ‘Yes’ to what God has been saying to us – to which we have been listening attentively.

And we also need to be wary if anyone in any form of Christian leadership tries to get us to obey them blindly. We can tell them that is simply not going to happen. We need to be persuaded and convinced, with reasons to have confident trust in them.

Dave Taylor November 2023

And there’s more . . ! Recently reading in **John 3:36**, I saw “*He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*” Next to ‘obey’, my Bible has a margin note: ‘or *believe*’. That aroused my curiosity. What Greek word could possibly be translated either as ‘obey’ or ‘believe’? It turned out to be **apeitheō** (ἀπειθέω), the negative of **peithō**, so really ‘*not obey*’ or ‘*not believe*’ or, more accurately, ‘*not allow yourself to be convinced or persuaded by*’. Again, highlighting response or, in this case, the lack of it and, significantly, emphasising the conscious choice involved. So, not just passively unconvinced but choosing to be unconvinced!

That, of course, made me look back at **peithō** itself, to see whether it also carries that clear implication of conscious choice. Yes, it does, so that makes even better sense of the instruction to ‘be convinced or persuaded’. It is something that is within our own decision-making scope, so we can’t make cheap excuses such as ‘I remain unconvinced’! In this sense, being convinced is not something that happens to us, but something that we choose to do. This makes it even more essential that we check out the evidence which is presented to us, before making our conscious response to it. Once again, blind ‘obedience’ is definitely NOT what the Lord is asking for.

And, just for the record, **apeitheō** is used 16 times in the New Testament. It is most commonly translated ‘disobey’ or ‘not obey’ and just once as ‘disbelieve’. In every case, as far as I can see, it refers to a wilful lack of response to the Lord. In 4 cases, it is directly linked to ‘the word of God’, ‘the truth’ or ‘the gospel’.¹

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¹ **Romans 2:8, 1 Peter 2:8, 3:1, 4:17**