

TRUST AND OBEY

It doesn't matter how many church members a church has. What matters is how many of them love Jesus. Or, if you prefer, how many of them love God and try earnestly to walk the Christian Way.

It is not the purpose of the church to save the world. That is God's job, and only God knows how; only God understands the timing; only God can coordinate the efforts so that they do more good than harm. Even then, in the larger picture, God does not finally intend to save the world. That's only an expression we use for God's purpose of saving us out of it. The sun, after all, is cooling off. That life will cease to exist on this planet is a foregone conclusion and a scientific fact. This is a temporary waystation. All thoughtful humans have known this for as far back as our records stretch.

The purposes and concerns of the Christian church are many, but they must come in the following order of priority. Now, I know many exceptions to this order of priority on the individual level, yet this order of priority must be maintained by the church or it will begin to weaken and die:

1.) The personal relationship between God and each individual member of the church is the top and most important priority.

2.) The personal relationship between members is the second most important purpose of the church. That is, we must be a support group for each other and we must be a disciple band of friends or we won't be able to stay on the Christian Path or Way for very long, or at least not very well.

3.) Inviting others into the faith family, and encouraging them to pay primary attention to their own personal relationship with God, is the third priority.

4.) Looking for ways to act or respond in the community that are consistent with our faith and our assignments from God is the fourth priority.

5.) Supporting and encouraging sister congregations to keep faithful, and joining with them for worship and service, is a fifth priority.

And we have many purposes shading down from there, all the way down to painting buildings and replacing roofs. Now, the paint and the roof can sidetrack some congregations, but if the roof exists to enhance the primary purposes, then taking care of it is a holy task. Where does Sunday School fit? In some churches, the children replace God and become the focus of worship. But nurturing our children in the Faith is legitimately part of our second priority. Even that, of course, is done in the hope that our children will discover and take to heart the first priority: their own personal relationship with God. A God who does not come first is not God.

What always matters most – what always must come first – is each of us responding to God ourselves, personally. That is where we find our true identity. That is where we discover our true purpose. That is where we get our marching orders, as well as the strength and vision to carry them out. Trust and obey. If we have a God, we scrap the barriers and defenses and learn to trust our God. If we have a God, our first desire, however reticent it comes, is to find God’s will for our lives. It is a matter of prayer. But the active verbs are “trust” and “obey.”

Sometimes it gets clearer if we start with what we *do* know, and work from there toward what we are not so sure about.

It has occurred to me more than once that God invented children so we could experience life from both sides – both the god side and the child side. We are God’s children, but we are also gods to our children (when they are young enough, of course). We can also learn from animals, if we come to love them as pets. It is called by various names, but we will call it Dogology, which means “the study of our relationship with God by noticing our relationship as a god to our pets.”

Sorry to drag you into personal history, but it’s hard to get the real flavor of an analogy without a true context. Through most of my growing-up years, people assumed I would end up in a job that had to do with animals. That looked to be my only interest, and many thought it was my only skill.

Trying to find some way to connect with something in me, my parents helped me start a Collie Kennel. We sold a Shetland pony colt named Ginger and bought “Golden Sandra of Tamarack.” She was only a few weeks old at the time, but she turned out to be pure angel (messenger from God) through some pretty hard years for me. She was my strongest link with sanity, my strongest link with God, my strongest

link with reality. She also raised a lot of pups which sold for quite a bit of money. She never failed to take first place in any dog show I entered her in. She was why I ended up as President of the Junior Collie Fanciers of America. Annually we put on the largest single-breed dog show in the country (right over here in Long Beach).

None of this was my doing. A gifted girl named Barbara Taylor had built the organization, and even Sandra was not entirely responsible for her own success. It was all kind of an accident, if you believe in such things. In the first place, we raised goats, and the goat's milk made Sandra's coat softer and sleeker than any normal collie's coat had a right to be. In the second place, she was always with me, and I was almost always on a horse. My parents were sometimes asked if I had grown there or if I could still get down off my horse if I wanted to. The point being, Sandra was always in incredible condition. She ran with the horses. And that was on top of her bloodlines and the thirty-five champions in her pedigree.

The trophies and blue ribbons were not very important. My Mom liked them, but mostly it was a little ritual we kept going through to keep people coming to pay good money for the puppies. None of that really matters, but it is leading up to the three things that do matter.

1.) TIME. Sandra and I spent a lot of time together. We got really close. We loved each other. That was what made the communication possible.

2.) OBEDIENCE. I'm not really sure how it happened, but we had an understanding about our relationship. I was the Master, and she was the servant. Pretty soon neither one of us questioned or tried to change this. If I said it and she could understand it, she did it. Period. End of issue.

Once, late in the evening, I gave her the command to "sit-stay." The next morning when I came out of my room, she did not greet me at the door in the usual fashion. Of course, I found her where I had left her. I gave her the release sign and she literally dashed to do her business – and then back to greet me.

There was no accusation in her eyes, no less love in her greeting. If I wanted her to stay at attention all night, that was my business. Whether I had good reasons or not was none of her concern. Her only concern was to please me. I made tearful vows never to give her a

careless command ever again. To my knowledge, I never did. I made mistakes, but they were not careless – not without caring.

As a result of this bond of love and obedience between us, we could spend even more time together. Sandra could go places most dogs could not go – into the grocery store, into the Whittier public library, into most of the stores there. At “heel,” she would shadow me all day, never be in the way, never cause anybody any problem. No leash could have improved her performance. Adults did not need the same rules for us that they had to use with others.

We also played endless games together. Some of them Sandra had helped to invent. I never recall trying to teach her to play football, for instance. But the two of us could beat any five kids in the school. Someone had to center the ball to me, and then Sandra and I could take care of the rest ... mostly Sandra.

3.) IDENTITY. Sandra had her own aura of confidence and authority. She knew who she was and that she was very special and highly valued. How do you say it? She was almost never in a fight. When she was, it ended very quickly. Most animals wouldn't challenge her authority, though she never “pushed it.” All the other animals on the place trusted her – cats, horses, goats, chickens, rabbits. She was midwife at all births, babysitter for all young (including human visitors), guardian of the realm. Other dogs who grew up or stayed on our place quickly learned all the rules without my saying a word. She taught them to not cross the boundaries without permission; to not bark without good reason; to not jump on people; to not try to get into the house unless invited. Things it had taken me months to get through to her, she could teach other dogs in a few days.

In short, Sandra's subservience – her obedience – did not turn her into a cowering, frightened, anxious, or nervous being. Quite the opposite. Everywhere she went, people were amazed and impressed by her. At first it started to “turn her head.” “Oohs” and “ahhs” and sounds of friendly approval would break her concentration. Then she would goof. But that was when she had been young, a mere puppy. Dogology can be pretty accurate, don't you think?

Lots of times Sandra was allowed to go pick up approval and affection from admirers. But only when the Master gave permission. That was one of the tougher lessons. Even if another dog tried to interfere, even if other humans were shouting contradictory orders, there was only

one voice she would obey. (Unless temporarily told to obey another.) That was a lot to ask. But she learned it. And: Do not eat from a stranger, without permission from the Master. There is danger in the world, and “friendly” is not always true. (There were thieves in our territory who would lace hamburger with arsenic and throw it to the dogs before a heist.)

When I was even younger, we lost a wonderful dog on the road. A human had swerved far off onto the shoulder to kill Brownie with his speeding car. That was not going to happen again! So we had drills. I’m sure none of them ever made any sense to Sandra. But I had seen dogs hit because they were confused or frightened when a car was coming from one direction and their owner was yelling at them from another. One dog I had seen – when his owner yelled at him to get out of the road – mistook his owner’s fear for anger and cowered down like he had done something wrong ... until the car killed him. Feeling guilty, but too undisciplined to obey, he died. (I wonder how many human tombstones that would fit on? “Feeling guilty, but too undisciplined to obey, he died.”) Never having known what it could be like between Master and dog – never having experienced the teamship that could be worked and played out every day – he died. It seemed very sad to me.

You see, the third factor that I am still trying to describe – the reason Sandra was so confident – was that she knew her place and her worth. She knew her identity. She knew she truly pleased her god about 99% of the time. She was always working for 100%, but that was her way. It seemed so sad, so unnecessary, that this other poor dog and his owner should be stricken by such a needless tragedy. In Dogology, that is known as the Second Principle of the Doctrine of Original Ignorance: “No dog is born knowing the Master’s will. All are disobedient and out of touch with the Master’s will, until taught.”

Of course, I saw the “accident” through my own eyes and measured it by my feelings toward Sandra. I would have been completely bereft. For this other owner, it may have been only a casual grief. But I still felt sorry for the dog who had ended up with such a poor, uncaring god. Imagine worshipping a god who cared too little to teach you even simple, basic commands so that, in a time of crisis, he couldn’t even give the word that would save you. Or that even if a command were given, you would still be too confused, frightened, disobedient, or guilty to move in time.

Because of my own bad memories, every week or two Sandra and I would go through the emergency drills. And then I tried to make sure we didn't get into situations where we would need them. Sandra must have thought they were the dumbest games we ever played, and wondered why we played them so often. I don't know if they ever saved her life. On the occasions when a potentially dangerous situation developed, we were out of the way long before it got scary.

Sometimes when my own God asks me to do things over and over that don't make a lot of sense to me – like pray every morning, whether I feel like it or not, even though we are going to spend the rest of the day together – I wonder if maybe my God has some memories that I don't know about. Maybe that's the drill. I also remember that Sandra got less mercy on drill instructions than on any other type of command. Those had to be perfect, instant, and right every time. And those were the very commands that probably made the least sense to her.

It's uncanny, this canine theology. Does your God teach you some of the drills (besides the reporting-in every morning)?

- a.) Be honest, with yourself and others, all the way every time.
- b.) Give value for value, even if nobody else does, and even if nobody seems to care or want it.
- c.) If you are wrong, admit it, say you are sorry, and try to make amends.

Things like that don't make any kind of sense in our kind of world. They are not very relevant to the larger issues that face and threaten us. They seem old-fashioned in most settings today, and from our perspective even make us awkward in many cases. And yet we get in trouble with God more and faster over items like these than over any others. It must be the drill! That means if we get really good at it, we may never see the dangers we are being saved from.

Back to Sandra for a minute. Eventually I went to high school. They made me take a class in biology. In that class, they tried to teach me some of the facts about animal anatomy. Among other things, they covered the size of the brain in various animals, including the dog. And they compared the intelligence capacity of these animals with that of an

average human being. Other students in the class acted pretty ho-hum, but I was staggered.

There were not many humans in the world, at that time, whom I would have compared favorably to any animal – never mind Sandra or my horse Becky. (The highest compliment I ever gave Mariana was that she reminded me of my horse. Mariana is a city girl and still has no understanding of how infatuated I must have been to make such a statement.) Becky is another story. We won't get into that.

Anyway, here was this biology teacher telling me that the least intelligent of all the humans around me were a lot smarter than the smartest dog could possibly be – and not just by a little, but many times over. You think *you* have lived through a faith crisis? That was not my first or only, but it registers with the best of them. I had no choice but to conclude that intelligence was not one of the more important factors in life. That was hasty; I eventually learned that it has to be in the picture somewhere. But that's not the issue at the moment.

I hope you're still with me. We said we were going to try to get simple and keep touching base with the basics. I did not grow up fast or easy. I lived in my own world, and I lived with animals as much as I could; for the rest, I just went through the motions to survive. That is oversimplified, but it will do. I tried to start living in the real world about seventh grade. By my sophomore year, in that high school biology class, it was still a real struggle. I was trying to wake up to the real world, and now the real world was trying to tell me that the only things I really knew and cared about were not worth much: God, and the animals.

That did not make sense to me because relationship, sharing, love, teamsmanship, and caring had mostly been between me and animals (not counting God). I communicated better with animals than humans; I trusted animals more than humans. I tried to take care of my horse and my dog, but they had both saved my life many times. It was not always easy to get on the inside with an animal, but once you did, you were there and they would never betray you.

If you offered Sandra meat, money, a better house, or a brighter future to betray me, she would have ignored you. If you pushed it, she would have bitten your head off. In my case, I had not often found that kind of integrity with humans. Some with a few. A lot with my father. But he was even harder to get inside with than the animals.

Now I was being told that the animals had none of these capacities; that they could not be conscious of any of this stuff I had experienced with them; that they were not advanced enough to have any connection with God; that I had projected all this stuff onto them.

I was trying to learn, mostly because God had said I had to. But nobody told me that this biology teacher knew a lot about biology but a whole lot less about God and animals than I did. So I got confused. Then I got quietly angry way down deep inside somewhere. And I started learning in earnest. A very big, outside world was telling me some strange lies and I wanted to know why. It turned out that they believed the lies themselves, so they did not mean to lie. But that doesn't mean the lies do no damage.

I loved Sandra with all my heart. And it seemed to me that she loved me back, and that often her heart was bigger than mine. Eventually I got to behavioral psychology (B.F. Skinner) and discovered that organisms merely do what helps them survive. I was a lonely little boy who liked to have my face licked, so I responded in a way that encouraged what I took to be affection. Meanwhile, Sandra needed food and safety for her pups, so she continued to behave in a way that ensured my continuing to provide for her needs.

I spent years wading through texts and books and classes and theories. And I gave it a good shot. I tried to imagine Sandra knowing by instinct that my life was more important than hers, so she saved me from that rattlesnake so I could go on feeding and caring for her species.

And the time Tony (that's a horse) kicked me (and laid me up for three months), and Becky lit into him and kicked the stuffings out of him for a full quarter of a mile down the road. And after he was going as fast as he could and not likely to stop, she was back at my side instantly, nuzzling me to see how I was. And she wouldn't stop until I was lying across her so she could carry me home. But it was only because her feeble brain realized that if she didn't save me, I might not bring her hay in the morning?

So I finally figured out that it was too bad a lot of very intelligent people didn't have a horse or a dog to grow up with, and didn't know that the soul exists in some animals as well as in some humans, whether any of their machines can measure it or not.

It left me with one big question, however. How could Sandra, in particular, fake so much intelligence? Love and soul could explain a lot. But she seemed to almost reason on my level. She got so she knew what I wanted or needed before I did. Over and over, she made choices as if she had a brain like mine, and our minds were in tune.

I think it was the obedience thing. The desire to please me seemed to grow. She would learn by repetition. Once the pattern was clear, she could add to the pattern “by feel,” it seemed. And over the years, she learned my patterns until she seemed to “think” as I did and “feel” as I did. So she lived on a plane a lot higher than she was capable of because her only focus, with whatever capacity and soul she had, was to please and obey me.

She did not have to reason, only to obey. She did not have to understand, only to please – by following as much as she could remember of the pattern that brought my approval. So she appeared to be thinking and in tune with my mind, almost on my mind’s level.

Of course, my dream is that one day I will be toward my God as Sandra was toward me. And though my intelligence in comparison to my God is far below what her intelligence was in comparison to me, she taught me that intelligence is not the only hope. If I obey God as she obeyed me, I can eventually learn patterns, live on a plane far beyond my native capacities, and even be in tune with a will that is far beyond my understanding.

In Dogology, we discovered three things:

- 1.) The relationship requires that Master and dog spend a great deal of time together.
- 2.) The roles in the relationship must be absolutely clear: I was the Master, Sandra the servant. If I said it and she could understand it, she would do it. Obedience.
- 3.) The more Sandra pleased me, the more confident and happy and sure of her worth she became. Through obedience, she learned her worth and identity.

In Theology, we discover exactly the same three things.