

## Voiding the Word

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on October 27, 2019.

*Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’” (Matthew 15:1–9).*

In 1898, James Vance, the popular minister of First Presbyterian Church of Nashville, preached a sermon on the biblical doctrine of predestination. Seeking to make a difficult doctrine more palatable, Vance argued for a predestination of God’s love in which he is obligated to save all his creation. According to Vance, “God is not glorified by the damnation of his creatures...God’s glory is his goodness, his grace; and if he can be glorified by the redemption of one soul, much more by all.”<sup>1</sup> The problem with Vance’s veiled universalism masqueraded as election is that it is not faithful to the Scriptures. It may sound lovingly appealing but it elevates the philosophy of man making void the Word of God. Although Vance’s doctrinal error was confronted, his popularity elevated him above reproof.<sup>2</sup>

Vance’s anti-biblical sentimentalism was codified in his 1907 book *The Eternal Man* in which he would deny essential biblical doctrines regarding the sinfulness of man, the atoning work of Christ upon the cross, and even the necessity of grace. According to Vance, “grace wakes the eternal within us into living power and expression, until we hold eternal convictions.”<sup>3</sup> Whatever that means. While you may never have heard of James Vance, he serves as an example in the history of our church of manipulating the Word of God. Indeed, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9). In fact, the liberal theology that Vance exemplifies would eventually lead to a conservative exodus of the Presbyterian US and the formation of what is today the Presbyterian Church in American (PCA). Ultimately, the theological liberalism of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century is not a modern phenomenon and can be seen throughout the church’s history. The root issue is rejecting the authority of the Bible.

According to J.I. Packer, there are three views on the authority of the Bible among those who acknowledge it. The first view is that “you should approach the Bible as a product of the church and identify mainstream church teaching with the biblical faith.” In other words, “what the

---

<sup>1</sup> Sean Michael Clayton, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2015), 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

church says, God says.”<sup>4</sup> (Storms, 52). The second view is that “Scripture and church teaching are essentially resource material to help us make up our own minds.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, neither are infallible but helpful. The third view is what Packer calls the “transcript of divine speech.” The Bible is the supreme authority as the literal Word of God. In this view, Packer says, “Holy Scripture should be thought of as *God preaching*—God preaching to me every time I read or hear any part of it—God the Father preaching God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

Which of these three views did Jesus hold? I’ll give you a few hints: Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets [meaning the Old Testament canon]; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot [meaning down to the smallest letter and accent mark], will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17-18). That is quite a detailed and comprehensive position on Scripture.

And Jesus validated the New Testament canon, its beginning and end, in his apostles when he told them, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-14). Therefore, by our Lord’s validation we have received the written Word of God in the Old and New Testament canons, Genesis to Revelation; nothing more but certainly nothing less.

And Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Meaning, every single word of the Bible is true and reliable. If you are to believe the Bible is true in part, you must believe it in whole. When tempted by the devil, when confronting the Sadducees, when condemning the Pharisees, the *living* Word of God quoted the *written* Word of God.

What was Jesus’ view of Scripture? In his own words: The Word of God is “truth” (John 17:17). In an age of relativism in which we are inundated with voices that say one thing but mean something else, in an age of skepticism in which truth is considered an abstract ideal rather than a living reality, we know the truth for God has spoken in his Word.

Interestingly enough, the Pharisees shared Jesus’ high view of Scripture. Their problem was not in believing in the authority of the Bible but in believing in it as the supreme authority. They were confusing man-made with God-given.

### **Confusing Man-made with God-given**

The Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus with a charge of error in the form of a question: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?” The assumption is that the disciples are

---

<sup>4</sup> C. Samuel Storms, *Packer On the Christian Life: Knowing God in Christ, Walking by the Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 54.

## *Voiding the Word*

behaving as instructed by Jesus, but the key phrase here is “the tradition of the elders.” What was this “tradition”? It was an oral tradition of practice, Jewish rules and regulations, followed strictly by the Pharisees. With this tradition was apparently the requirement to wash your hands before eating, drawing from that oft-quoted Bible verse: “Cleanliness is next to godliness,” (which is not really in the Bible).

As an aside, is there anything wrong with washing your hands before eating? Is washing your hands before eating a good practice of hygiene and healthy living? So, what’s the problem? The problem is that the scribes and Pharisees had elevated a man-made good into a God-given command, a command that Jesus’ disciples were breaking.

Jesus does not instruct his disciples to go and wash their hands. Rather, he takes the scribes and Pharisees from “the tradition of the elders” to the Moral Law of God. Observe how Jesus confronts, teaches, and judges them. What is the Fifth Commandment? “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Ex. 20:12). What was the punishment for breaking the Fifth Commandment? Whoever [dishonors or reviles] his father or his mother shall be put to death” (Ex. 21:17). Such is the commandment of God from his written Word, but what did the tradition of the elders say? According to Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees followed a provisional practice that permitted “If anyone tells his father or his mother, what you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.” The implication is that caring for your aging parents is a way you may practically honor them. This of course likely involves a financial commitment of sorts, a commitment the Pharisees apparently sought to avoid.

What is the best way for a “religious” person to circumvent God’s law? Replace it with a religious work. Make it sound spiritual, sacrificial, a gift to God. Through a religious vow, known as *Qorban*, children could elevate the financial commitment of caring for their parents by instead dedicating money, investments, or property to God in trust with the temple treasury, a win-win for children and the temple but not for the elderly parents.

Of course, an entire sermon could be preached on the right application of the Fifth Commandment (which I have done recently), but what is the point of Jesus’ example? The scribes and Pharisees had confused the man-made with the God-given and in so doing had broken God’s law and encouraged others to do the same, echoing the Apostle Paul’s condemning charge, “Though they know God’s decrees that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (Rom. 1:32). Such is the liability of all who do not hold to the supremacy of God’s Word and its authority over our lives.

Indeed, “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16) and is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). To hold to any view other than the Bible as the inspired Word of God and the supreme rule of faith and life is to render yourself vulnerable to man-made deception. In your life, have you elevated the man-made over the God-given? Perhaps it’s the counsel of a parent, a friend, or a teacher. Perhaps it’s a self-help book or an insightful podcast. Perhaps it’s your political party’s perspective or your news media’s report. Whatever it may be, if you elevate above or equal to the Bible, the Word of God, it will lead you away from the Lord.

## *Voiding the Word*

Does this mean that we agree with the person who says they have no creed or confession but the Bible? In point of fact, such a position is naïve; we all have formulated creeds or confessions whether written or not. In my experience, those without creeds, confessions, and catechisms are often those disconnected from history and given to arbitrary deductions. If you read the Bible beyond a cursory reading at some point you must make an interpretive decision. Throughout Christian history, creeds, confessions, and catechisms have been used to summarize and systematize biblical truths, often in a logical and succinct format. However, we should only embrace our creeds, confessions, and catechisms in so far as they are faithful to the Word of God, and even then they are always secondary.

In the case of the scribes and Pharisees, their rules and regulations were not used as secondary systematic summaries of Scripture but manipulative means of voiding the Word, and so influential that they became acceptable, commandable, and enforceable, but also telling. When the man-made is confused with the God-given it inevitably leads to a superficiality in which profession is confused with possession.

### **Confusing Profession with Possession**

A narrative that began with a charge against the disciples' unwashed hands ends with a prophetic judgment against the scribes' and Pharisees' hardened hearts: "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

To be clear, Jesus' judgment is not against the greedy tax collectors or wayward sinners of the culture but against the religious right, the cultural guardians of Judaism. They were the rightful descendants of their father Abraham; they were the dutiful keepers of Moses' Law. They were the conservative soldiers fighting the culture war and were determined to win no matter the cost or consequences, even if that meant voiding God's Word in the process. By outward appearance and verbal profession, they were the children of Israel, worshipers of the one true God. But what they professed they did not possess. They seemingly honored God with their words but not with their hearts. They seemingly worshiped God rightly, but in voiding his Word they actually worshiped vainly.

Compare and contrast Jesus' disciples with the scribes and Pharisees. In the presence of their Lord, the disciples were unshackled from the tradition of the elders, while the scribes and Pharisees were constrained. While it may seem insignificant to us, consider the freedom Jesus' disciples likely felt when they were no longer under the burden of a man-made command, as the scribes and Pharisees blindly police for legal compliance. Possessing a freedom that is found only in Christ alone, Jesus' disciples broke the cultural standards and ate without washing their hands, while the scribes and Pharisees held faithful to their standards and missed Christ.

In contrast, the scribes and Pharisees are shackled to their tradition, held captive under a man-made law and a prison of their own creation. They are not only burdened with keeping the tradition they are determined to place the burden upon others. Professing to be the heirs of Abraham and the keepers of Moses' law, they neither know God nor truly worship him. As the Proverb says, "The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his

## *Voiding the Word*

sin” (Prov. 5:22). Enslaved to their tradition, voiding the Word of God, the only hope of freedom for the scribes and Pharisees, and everyone else, is the living Word of God.

The freedom of God’s saving grace is indeed found in Christ alone for scribes, Pharisees, and sinners like you and me. Not according to the tradition of the elders but according to the Word of God “by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8). And it is by God’s grace through faith in Christ that our profession and possession reconcile: Professing faith in Christ we are indwelt by his Spirit who “bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16).

In Christ we truly possess what we profess. And by the grace of the Holy Spirit we are to “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8). In other words, those who truly possess what they profess must constantly guard against being deceived. And how do we do that? How do we know true truth?

One of the foundational doctrines of the Protestant Reformation was the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone. This doctrine served as a guard against the errors of the church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century just as it did in first century Israel just as it does today. Since the Garden of Eden until the final judgment there has been and will be the temptation to void God’s Word. The scribes and Pharisees were not innovative merely depravingly consistent.

Therefore, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is a biblical doctrine of the church triumphant. We hold to Scripture alone to know and believe the gospel. We hold to Scripture alone to not fall prey to the enslaving philosophy and tradition of man. We hold to Scripture alone to stand against error in the church. And we hold to Scripture alone to glorify God, who has given us his Word. Therefore, let our testimony be the same as the great reformer Martin Luther: “I did nothing; the Word did everything.” Amen.