

# TRUTH

“. . . Your word is truth” (John 17:17)

August 2023

## THE COMMANDS OF MEN VERSUS THE COMMANDS OF GOD

Not long after the powerful day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter and the other apostles found themselves being persecuted and even imprisoned. Their message during those early days of the church was two-fold. First, they preached Christ and Him crucified (Acts 2:23,36; 4:10). That was the apostles' message then, and it should continue to be at the forefront of preaching today.

Secondly, though, they let it be known clearly that nothing could stop them from this mission. The Jewish leaders had threatened them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18,21). And when they were called before the council again, because they had not stopped, their answer was simple: “*We ought to obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29).

What are Peter and the apostles saying here? Are the commands of men and the commands of God in direct conflict? Should we, as Christians today, choose between these two things?

First, let's notice that the commands of men and the commands of God are not *inherently* at odds. Paul wrote in Romans 13:1-7 that Christians should obey the governing authorities, or we might say: commands that are from men. Also, Jesus would say in Matthew 22:15-22 that there are responsibilities that men have to the government. Thus, there are some commands of men that can, and should be, obeyed.

Secondly, though they might not inherently be at odds, there might still be occasions when the commands of men do contradict the commands of God. In our earlier reference to Acts 4 and 5, Peter and the apostles, no doubt, remembered the command of Jesus to, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you . . .*” (Matthew 28:19,20). And when they hear the words of the Jewish leaders not to teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18), Peter and the apostles know they must decide between these two options.

We can, therefore, understand from Scripture that there may be times when Christians have to choose between the laws of their government and the word of God. In those cases, may we strive to follow the

footsteps of Peter and the apostles and realize that the commands of God must come first.

The Bible also addresses a second type of command of men. Different from government authority, this type of command of men deals with things in the realm of our worship and service to God. One section of Scripture that discusses this is found in Mark 7:1-16. The Pharisees questioned Jesus about the actions of His disciples and how those actions did not line up with their Jewish traditions (or commands of men). Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah and said, “*And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*” (Mark 7:7).

He plainly points out their problem by describing that they were “*laying aside the commandment of God*” (Mark 7:8). I do not think that any of us want to be described as laying aside what God says. In this passage, the commands of men were dealing with the washing of pitchers, cups, and even hands. However, for us today, it could be any number of things that men put forth as commands that are beyond the commands of God.

So, what are we to do? How can we be sure we are following the commands of God and not men? Paul would say, “*Test all things; hold fast what is good*” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). John would write, “*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God . . .*” (1 John 4:1). We must examine everything that we hear and consider all practices in light of the word of God.

We may not like certain government laws. But, just because we are instructed to pay taxes or obey a certain driving speed limit does not mean we can ignore these types of commands of men. However, when a command of men goes beyond the commands of God, then we should obey God's law first.

Paul gives a stern warning to those who might be tempted to listen to the commands of men first: “*Beware lest anyone cheat you . . . according to the tradition of men . . . and not according to Christ*” (Colossians 2:8). May we always be found on the Lord's side, following the Lord's commands, and obeying the Lord's will.

-- Joel Danley

## LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF KING AHAZ

Perhaps you are more familiar with the name Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a righteous king, and he was Ahaz's son. Ahaz left his mark on the nation of Judah, too, but unfortunately his influence was horrible.

We read about the sixteen-year reign of Ahaz in 1 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28. The Bible says Ahaz walked in the ways of the kings of Israel (2 Chronicles 28:2). Since all of Israel's kings were ungodly, it says a lot to say that Ahaz acted like them.

Ahaz' time on the throne often involved conflict with other nations. When the combined forces of Israel and Syria came against Ahaz, rather than turn to the Lord for help, Ahaz appealed to the king of Assyria to come rescue Judah (2 Kings 16:5-7). In another instance, when the Edomites and Philistines invaded Judah, Ahaz once again reached out to the kings of Assyria to come deliver Judah (2 Chronicles 28:16-18). What does it say about a leader of God's people when he trusts in the arms of flesh instead of trusting in the mighty arm of Jehovah?!

Ahaz openly worshipped idols. He saw an altar on foreign soil which he liked, so he charged a priest of God to make one like it for the king, who then made offerings on it (2 Kings 16:10-16). How widespread was the influence of King Ahaz's idolatry? He *"made for himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem. And in every single city of Judah he made high places to burn incense to other gods"* (2 Chronicles 28:24,25).

Here are some spiritual takeaways from the Bible's record of the life and rule of Ahaz:

- It was because of Ahaz that God brought Judah low. What did Ahaz do that was so awful? *"For the LORD brought Judah low because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had encouraged moral decline in Judah"* (2 Chronicles 28:19). In any setting, when leaders give "the green light" to sin and immorality, the consequences will be disastrous. Ahaz saw evil, embraced evil, practiced it, and encouraged others to participate in it. By doing so, the writing was on the wall for the nation of Judah.

- It is hard to conceive of a child of God doing some of the things that Ahaz did. He imitated the religious practice of the heathen by burning his children in the fire, an act that was done to appease the wrath of a so-called god (2 Chronicles 28:3). Did Jehovah not forbid His people to do such a thing? Of course, He did. But when people have a rebellious spirit, they do as they wish. If God's people are going to please Him, they must be distinct. We must not love the world, imitate the world, or be friends with it. Our loyalty must be to the Lord alone . . . in every setting and at all times.

- Something caused Ahaz' spiritual ruin. What was it? *"For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus . . . But they were the ruin of him"* (2 Chronicles 28:23). Sin is the only thing that can destroy a person's relationship with God and prevent that person from pleasing Him.

- How deep-seated was the corruption in Ahaz's heart and life? It is written that he was *"continually unfaithful to the LORD"* and he *"became increasingly unfaithful to the LORD"* (2 Chronicles 28:19,22). Here are three truths about unfaithfulness that we see in those statements: (1) It is possible for a child of God to be *unfaithful* to Him . . . (2) It is possible for an unfaithful person to *continue* in that condition . . . (3) It is possible for a person's unfaithfulness to *increase*, that is, a person can go from bad to worse.

- Ahaz was deceived into thinking that man-made practices are as good as what God prescribes. He praised and sacrificed to the "gods" of the Syrians, saying that they helped the Syrians (2 Chronicles 28:23). His conclusion? If they help those kings of Syria, then I will worship them and they can help me, too. When will humans, including those who are in God's family, ever learn that the way of spiritual safety and faithful service to the Creator is to follow the instructions that He gives us and nothing else?!

- There is more than one way to disrupt the proper worship of the Lord. What was Ahaz' method of corrupting worship? Ahaz *"shut up the doors of the house of the LORD"* (2 Chronicles 28:24). He did what?! He shut the doors to the temple, which would prevent the priests from carrying out their priestly functions. How ungodly! No individuals, no groups, and no civil authorities at any level have the right to prevent God's people from worshipping Him as He prescribes. Anyone who tries to hinder God's people from worshipping properly will not be held guiltless.

- There are occasions when the children of ungodly people grow up to be faithful servants of the Lord, not *because* of their parents' influence, but *despite* the environment in which they were raised. Ahaz was awful, but his son Hezekiah, who replaced him as king, served Jehovah with a loyal heart. A reminder: neither sin nor righteousness can be transferred from one person to another (Ezekiel 18:20).

- Ahaz was blessed to hear one of the most amazing prophecies ever uttered. It was to Ahaz that these words were spoken: *"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel"* (Isaiah 7:14). Like all of us, Ahaz, who is listed in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:9), needed Immanuel to come be the Savior of the world.

-- Roger D. Campbell

## Jesus — the Resurrection and the Life

After His friend Lazarus died, Jesus went to Bethany, where Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters, lived. Martha came out to meet Jesus, and they had a fascinating conversation about life, death, and rising again/resurrection. We read about it in John 11:21-27.

Jesus assured Martha, "*Your brother will rise again*" (11:23). Her reaction was, "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day*" (11:24). In response to that affirmation, the Master declared three facts which are recorded in the next two verses. Let us take a look at those three truths and see how they relate to real life, real people, and real eternity.

First fact: "*I am the resurrection and the life*" (11:25). When Jesus lived on the earth, He showed His power to raise people from physical death (three specific cases are recorded). Our Lord also manifested His power and authority to spiritually raise those who were dead in sin, as He stated, ". . . *the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live*" (John 5:25). Jesus came to give abundant life to those who serve Him (10:10).

What about at the last day? ". . . *all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation*" (5:28,29). In this world, Jesus gives physical life, a resurrected life from sin, and abundant spiritual life. When the end of the world comes, Jesus will raise all of the dead and give eternal life to His faithful followers. Life and resurrection, both physical and spiritual, come through Jesus and Him alone.

Second fact: "*He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live*" (11:25). Jesus' disciples are not exempt from physical death (Hebrews 9:27), but Jesus' wonderful promise is that they will live again, being raised to live eternally with the Lord. Yes, the righteous will go into eternal life (Matthew 25:46).

Third fact: "*And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die?*" (11:26). Here, the words "never die" are equivalent to "life that never ends . . . life eternal." A part of us, our physical body, will die. Another part of us, our soul/spirit, will live forever and ever.

The Christ proclaimed that believers in Him will never die (11:26). He previously declared, "*I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death*" (8:51). What is the requirement for never seeing death, that is, having eternal life? One must keep Jesus' word. Throughout the book of John, when we read that one who *believes* has eternal life, such a saved believer is one who *obeys* Jesus. Think about it.

-- Roger D. Campbell

## Lessons from 1 John 4:1-6

This section of the Scriptures deals with "*the spirit of truth and the spirit of error*" (1 John 4:6). In the sight of God, there is something called "truth," and everything that does not harmonize with it is "error." Those facts may not be widely-accepted in the twenty-first century, but man's thoughts do not alter the facts.

**Test the spirits** – "*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God*" (4:1). In life, people who are wise do not believe everything they hear or read. When it comes to spiritual teachings, every child of God needs to take that approach. When we hear or read a message, we must test it by comparing it to what God's word says. Only God's truth can make us free (John 8:32), so we do not want to endanger our souls by following the teachings of men. It takes time to investigate and learn the Scriptures. It takes an honest heart and courage to reject what does not harmonize with them. Be a tester!

**False prophets** – What was so serious and urgent about putting each teaching/teacher to the test? In John's words, it was "*because many false prophets have gone out into the world*" (4:1). False messengers were (and are today) "*of the world*" (4:5). In John's day, at least some of them were denying that Jesus came in the flesh. Were false messengers rare in the early days of the church? No. John said there were "many" (4:1). The really sad thing is, "many" folks follow false messages. It may sound crazy, but it is true. The Bible says so (2 Peter 2:2).

**Antichrist(s)** in the first century – In John's day, an antichrist was one who denied "*that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*" (4:3; 2:22). In any generation, one who denies the Christ's authority, deity, or teaching is an antichrist. There already were many of them in the first century (2 John 7). The notion that a single, super-powerful Antichrist will rise up against the Lord just prior to the end of the world is a fable not found in the Bible. Again, anyone who opposes the Christ and His plan in any way is an antichrist.

**"Of God" vs. "not of God"** – One who confesses that the Christ has come in the flesh is "of God," (4:2). One who denies such is "not of God" (4:3). One who is "not of God" is also said to be "of the world" (4:5). Christians who overcome are "of God" (4:4). One who hears and accepts the truth is "of God," but one who will not hear it is "not of God" (4:6).

**Key to victory** – Why are saints victorious? ". . . *and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world*" (4:4). The One who is in us is the Lord Himself, Conqueror of all!

-- Roger D. Campbell

## THE CHALLENGE TO CONNECT/FIND MY PLACE IN THE LORD'S WORK

"I am really blessed to be a Christian! I am so happy that I made the decision to obey the gospel and become a part of God's family. But honestly, I am not sure what I can do to be helpful in the Lord's Cause, and sometimes I feel like I am not really connected to other Christians."

Do those sentiments sound familiar? There are members of the Lord's body who are struggling to find their place in His work, or at least they do not feel as involved and connected as they would like to be.

It is God's will that each Christian always abound in "*the work of the Lord*" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Epaphroditus was a brother who gave his all "*for the work of Christ*" (Philippians 2:30). And the beloved Persis "*labored much in the Lord*" (Romans 16:12). So, being heavily involved in the Lord's work is both *desirable* and *doable*.

Like our Lord Jesus, Christians are on a mission. We are trying to help people have the best life possible in this world as they prepare for the best eternity. God wants us to be "*fervent in spirit*" (Romans 12:11) as we approach and participate in that task. Enthusiasm in serving the Lord is contagious!

At the forefront of the Lord's work is evangelism. This needs to be our main focus! "Evangelism" means to communicate the gospel to lost people. The gospel is God's power to salvation (Romans 1:16), so lost people need to hear, believe, and obey that precious message in order to be saved. That is where you and I come in: we are the instruments by which the gospel is communicated to the lost.

In order to have a spiritual harvest, there must be laborers. Jesus said the harvest is plenteous, but the laborers are few (Matthew 9:36-38). We need seed-sowers! There certainly is a place for public evangelism (Acts 5:40,42), but the main way that people are won to the Lord is by one-on-one teaching, like we see Philip teaching the eunuch (Acts 8:26-40).

When it comes to evangelism, if I am not yet ready to conduct one-on-one studies, what can I do? I could help arrange a study, then go along with the prospect to the study to show my support, to help the prospect feel more at ease, and to observe and learn about how to teach. I also could pass along tracts or articles to lost people, share a DVD/video with them, or encourage them to take a Bible correspondence course. Do not fret over trying to say the perfect words as you approach a lost person about setting up a Bible study. Pray about it, then speak from a heart that cares about lost souls . . . Good things will happen!

The work of the church includes helping the needy, sometimes called "benevolence." In the New

Testament, we often see the benevolent spirit of the first-century church as the disciples rallied to support and take care of one another's needs (Acts 4:32-37; 11:27-30). One special group of people whom the church can assist are widows (1 Timothy 5:16), and we also have a duty to help kids who do not have providing parents (James 1:27). Why not make a list of possible ways that you might assist others?

The church needs to be edified, which means to be built up in the spiritual realm. Members are edified when they are taught the word of God (Acts 20:32). We are edified when we assemble to worship in spirit and in truth (1 Corinthians 14:26). The Lord wants us to edify one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11). We can uplift each other by showing an example of faith, courage, and perseverance (Matthew 5:16). Christians need encouragement. Barnabas was a great encourager of others (Acts 4:36). Saying something to exhort others is something that all of us can do. Send a card, a text, an e-mail, or say it in person.

How do I find my place in God's work? Each of us has some ability/talent. We have different areas and different levels of abilities, but we all have them (Matthew 25:14-30). Whatever the Lord has placed in our hands, we need to use it for His glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

But how can a person know what his strengths/abilities are? One way is through experience, and the only way to gain experience is by giving something an earnest try. Do not forget that abilities can grow. In some areas of service, our growth may occur rapidly, but in other situations it can take much longer. Try to be patient with yourself. Also, the feedback which we get from other mature Christians can help us identify areas in which we have talent. They also might be able to provide insight into how we can use and develop our abilities.

How can I connect with and grow closer to other members of the church? Here are three quick ideas. (1) Spend time together socially outside of the context of worship assemblies (Acts 2:46); (2) Do something together in the Lord's work (like visit a shut-in Christian or take food to a grieving family); (3) Stay in touch by phone, text, e-mail, or social media.

Brothers and sisters, we are part of the greatest family in the world! There is a place for all of us in God's work, and that work deserves our best effort.

-- Roger D. Campbell

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