

When the Bible is Not God's Word

Matthew 4:1-11

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Sept. 21), 2025

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We believe in the infallible Word of God. His name is Jesus!

-Shane Claiborne

Earlier this week, to commemorate Robert Redford, Jane and I watched the 1975 movie, *Three Days of the Condor*, with Redford, Faye Dunaway, and Cliff Robertson. Redford is a low-level employee of the C.I.A. who reads books for a living looking at plots and ideas. Something he does not understand goes wrong and he finds himself on the run. Cliff Robertson is an upper-level C.I.A. employee who is trying to get Redford to come in. At one point, Robertson says something about “the intelligence community” and Redford responds, “Community? You people are kind to yourselves.”

This exchange caught my attention. I think most of us in 2025 would not think twice about hearing a journalist or politician or whomever, refer to the “intelligence community” or to the term “community” being attached to any number of other modifiers: the “business community,” the “sports betting community,” the “political community,” etc. for example. Community, which originally had to do with sharing life together and seeking each other's good, the good we have in common, becomes misused. It turns a benign term to something that in 1975 was considered at least suspect and perhaps malicious. In 1975 it stood out and the Robert Redford character catches it and calls it out. Nowadays, we are more likely to not notice it at all.

It's an example of how language can be manipulated to mean something different from its original intention. And over time we can become oblivious to it.

Early in 1933, immediately after Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany, laws began to be passed resulting in a gradual but unrelenting Nazification of society. Called *Gleichschaltung*, which means something like “synchronization,” meant that everything and every institution, including the arts and culture and language, had to conform to Nazi orientation and perspectives.

Dean Stroud is a professor of German, and also an ordained Presbyterian minister, has spent a lifetime studying how Nazis used language and how German Confessing Church pastors used language in opposition. One example he gives is how Nazi speech dealt in superlatives. Hence, Hitler was the “smartest” leader of the “bravest” people of the “purest” blood, and Germany was the “greatest country” and “most glorious” of nations in the most “heroic” of wars and struggles against the “worst” of enemies in the “most dangerous” of times. Stroud also points out that the superlative is the quintessential advertising mode, which is why the Nazis reserved it for their own special use by eliminating all competition and maintaining sole right of use (Dean Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow*, p. 43).

Historian Victoria Barnett points out that Nazi language was so manipulated and controlled that by 1943 Himmler made a famous speech to SS troops saying that one of their greatest achievements was, “We have killed the Jewish people but we have remained decent.”

What is downright demonic, is that in ten years of manipulating language and all of society, Himmler could have said such a thing, and no one objected. Barnett says, “Himmler's words, like Nazism in general, stood traditional morality

on its head” (Barnett, *Bystanders*, p. 92). And instead of disgust and outrage, Himmler’s words were celebrated.

Today, I want to talk about how the Powers of Domination, Death, and Evil manipulate language, so we’re easily confused and distracted, and how Jesus said “No!” to such manipulation.

Beginning with Matthew 3:13, Jesus goes through the waters of baptism, hears the affirming voice from heaven, and is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. At baptism, Jesus is reminded that he is called as God’s anointed, the Messiah. But the kind of Messiah he will be is to be decided out in the wilderness. As far as we can tell, Jesus has spent his entire life preparing for this moment, growing in his relationship with God. So, by the time we get to this story, Jesus goes directly into the wilderness and for the next forty days where he must discern and clarify what kind of Messiah he will be.

Of course, this is not a story about Jesus getting back to nature and getting back in touch with his roots. This story includes Satan, whom Walter Wink calls the spirit of the systems of domination, or the Powers. Satan, also known as the Great Confuser is there to confuse, to tempt, to distract, and above all, to become sovereign and lord.

Satan uses three fundamental temptations for those who want to control and dominate the systems in this world. Jesus responds with a clear and resounding no. In the wilderness, Jesus’s faithfulness and obedience to the Living God takes the form of *resistance*. Here, at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry we learn what he will *not* do. The kind of Messiah he will *not* be, the means he will *not* take, the ends he will *not* pursue. In his obedience to God, Jesus says no to three particular

temptations of the Confuser, which represent the fundamental priorities of the Powers of the world.

The first temptation is to turn stones to bread. It is the temptation to control economics/the financial system while, at the same time, insuring his own survival. Responding and resisting with a verse from Deuteronomy, Jesus says, “One does not live by bread alone.” In other words, learning to depend on God alone and obeying God alone is more important than securing one’s own survival. Indeed, people and systems can suffer death by trying to live on bread alone. Witness our own society’s consumer capitalism.

Next, Satan takes Jesus to the highest pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and urges Jesus to make a dramatic religious display and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus resists again, and again quoting from Deuteronomy, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Satan is trying to convince Jesus to use God for his own ends. To make God a means to his own success and power. “Jump from the Temple, Jesus, and in front of all the people, angels will dramatically save you.” And pay attention to this, Satan quotes the Bible, Psalm 91:11-12, to Jesus but still Jesus refuses.

How often do we claim divine sanction for our side in war, for our side in politics and secular power? One of the primary ways the Powers make idols of themselves is by using God as a means to their ends. But Jesus says no to their idolatry. He will not use God.

Finally, Satan plays the nationalistic card, the temptation to political power and create an empire in the ways of the world – the ways of domination, and coercion, and violence.

I think it is interesting that Satan has all the worldly power to give. The devil quotes Psalm 2:8 saying, “All the kingdoms can be yours, if you will just fall down and worship me.”

My oh my, how the disciples of Jesus, the church has given in to this temptation. For the first three centuries of the church, we followers of Jesus did not seek worldly power, we would not take up the sword and kill or dominate or use violent and coercive power. But after Constantine became emperor of all the Roman empire in 313, we began to change. Suddenly, instead of being persecuted we found ourselves in control of the nation, and it became in our interest to keep control.

To say yes to this temptation is the temptation to idolatry. The nation-state is always seeking our allegiance and our devotion hence, we sing an anthem to the nation, and an anthem is defined as a song of worship, and we make pledges of our loyalty to the nation. And in an ultimate act of worship, we even offer up our children in sacrifice for the nation. As Martin Luther said that we can tell what we worship by what we sacrifice our children to.

Jesus refuses the temptation to nationalism. He says no! Jesus responds by saying, “Get away from me, Satan, for scripture says, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.’”

Jesus resists each temptation. And he does so by using the only weapon that he will ever use against the Systems of Domination and Death: the Word of God.

This is what the Apostle Paul in Ephesians refers to as “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). Every time Jesus is tempted, he is able to say no by knowing the Bible and quoting the Bible. And it is why Martin Luther is able to say in his great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” (which we will sing shortly), “The prince of darkness grim, We tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, For lo! His doom is sure, One little word shall fell him.”

It is important to notice that it is not that Jesus is opposed to economics, religion, or politics. In fact, in his ministry, Jesus does talk about economics, the dangers of wealth, and the particular care God has for the poor. Certainly, the Jesus Movement is religious, but instead of dramatic spectacles at the top of the Temple, Jesus took a towel and a wash basin and washed feet. And certainly, Jesus is political, he does proclaim the kingdom of God, after all, but it is not the politics of the Powers; it is not the politics of power and domination. God’s kingdom is the politics of Jesus, a different kind of politics, the politics of a people embodying this Way of Jesus, this Way of peace and justice and mercy and grace and forgiveness, of suffering servanthood.

So, part of the temptation is to get Jesus to say “yes” to things which seem to be good. Furthermore, part of the method of temptation is the use of the Bible. Throughout the narrative there is all kinds of Bible quoting going on. Satan quotes Scripture to Jesus, and Jesus turns around and quotes it back to him.

How does Jesus know the difference between turning stones into bread here in the wilderness and when to turn a few fish and some loaves of bread into enough bread to feed 5,000 in the wilderness later? Furthermore, how do we know if the Bible we are hearing is a Word from God or a word the Powers use for their own ends? And how do we keep from using the Bible in the same oppressive or

exploitative way? For example, how did Jesus hear the voice at his baptism, which was quoting Ps 2:7, “You are my beloved Son,” as a word from God and later, when Satan tempted him from the mountaintop and quoted Ps 2:8, “I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession,” Jesus knew it was not a word from God?

Jesus is able to make distinction between actions which seem, at first seem identical. He is able to know when the Bible is the Word from God and when the Bible is not God’s Word. Jesus knows there is a difference. God is the difference. Satan specifically tempts Jesus to do works of economics, religion, and politics without God. Satan tempts Jesus using the Bible, but it is the Bible without God. Without God, economics, politics, and religion can be twisted into something that is the opposite of God’s intentions. Without God, the Bible can be used in the service of evil.

The temptation to power and violence always involves abstracting the word from God, from its context, from who said it, to whom it was said, and why it was said. And the temptation to power can also abstract good actions from what God intends them to be.

So how do we know? How do we know when to say “yes” and when to say “no” and how do we recognize the difference? How do we recognize when the Bible is the Word of God and when it is not? How do we recognize when a conviction and practice of the church might be destructive and when it is good and life-giving?

Yale theologian George Lindbeck gives the example of a crusader saying “Christ is Lord” while cleaving the skull of an infidel. Lindbeck says “Christ is Lord” in that context is a false statement, though in other contexts the same words

might be true.” The statement “Christ is Lord” is true only when it also embodies the Lordship of Christ as suffering servant.” (*The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 64). The temptation to violence is always a giveaway that something is wrong, and we are being tempted by the Great Confuser.

We can get up and shout Jesus’s name, proclaim him Lord and Savior, cry when we quote the Bible, and pray all day but if we are using such things as ways to violence, control, domination, division, and dehumanize people, then it is false, and we are guilty of giving into the temptations of Evil and Death.

Religion journalist Brian Kaylor reported this week of a far-right politician in the United Kingdom who also works for the UK branch of Charlie Kirk’s Turning Point organization. The political leader shouted to a crowd about Kirk’s assassination, “We’re under no illusion. Meek and mild, turn the other cheek is over. Each and every one of you should be radicalized by what has happened!” And the crowd responded by shouting, “Christ is king! Christ is king!” (*Word&Way*).

Here is an example of the dangerous irony proclaiming “Christ is king” while at the same time dismissing key teachings of Christ.

William Stringfellow was a remarkable lay theologian of the 1960’s, 70’s, and who died in 1985. He was and is very important to me. Stringfellow uses the term “babel” to name these lies and falsehoods which seek to convince us they are truth. He said, Babel does two things. First, babel overwhelms and dumbfounds the conscience: Babel means the inversion of language, ... and it targets the faculties of comprehension--sanity and conscience...

Second, beyond numbing the conscience babel lays the foundation for violence. Here Stringfellow quotes Alexander Solzhenitsyn:

Let us not forget that violence does not exist by itself and cannot do so; it is necessarily interwoven with lies. Violence finds its only refuge in falsehood, falsehood its only support in violence. Any man who has once acclaimed violence as his method must inexorably choose falsehood as his principle (Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, pp. 97-107).

Stringfellow believed that discernment was the most basic gift of the Holy Spirit to the church. Discernment enables Christians to expose and rebuke the Powers of Death while also affirming the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ actively incarnate in the world. Discernment has to do with listening and watching for God in Scripture and around us. It has to do with paying attention to God wherever you are and with whomever you're with, and listening for God in and through our neighbors, especially from those who might be considered different from us, and our neighbors who show up at H.O.P.E and other places of service, and always, always, always, listening to God through our neighbors who are impoverished and suffering.

Stringfellow believed that the practice of discernment requires an immersion in God and in Scripture and this immersion is a "primary, practical, and essential tactic of resistance" (Stringfellow, *Ethic*, pp. 138-139).

The essential in Jesus's ability to discern and resist the temptations of the Powers, was that he knew God, spent time with God and listened to God. He knew Scripture, spent time with Scripture, and read Scripture with others in mind. And Jesus listened to God in others, especially those who were suffering and in great need. In John, Jesus says the sheep know the voice of their shepherd; we only

know the voice or word of God if we are immersed in God every day. Every day.

Both Matthew and Luke conclude their story of Jesus resisting Satan in the wilderness with a word of warning and foreshadowing: “Then the devil left him” and Luke adds, “Until an opportune time.”

So, after forty days in the wilderness of becoming clear what he is not going to do and who he is not going to be, the first thing Jesus does in Matthew and Luke is tell us who he is and what he is about. In Luke he goes straight to his hometown synagogue and preaches what is called the Nazareth Manifesto. In Matthew he proclaims the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins and so do we with the Nazareth Manifesto and the Sermon on the Mount.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that only a Christian community immersed in Scripture and prayer and suffering service is capable to resist idolatrous claims of Nazism. He said, “The Word of God must go forth from the Church into all the world.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.