

“God’s word for us is always an invitation, not an ultimatum.”

by Pastor Dan Hooper ■ May 23, 2007

That’s a theme that I stressed in several Lenten sermons earlier this year.

It is typical that any preacher claims to be speaking the Word of the Lord. It amazes me that there is so much diversity in what preachers say, all claiming to be faithful to the word.

Well, yes, what we find in the Scriptures is an *amazing* spread of subject material, and not all of it squares with every other word. There are open questions, about which Christians may always debate. And I think that God actually encourages us to discuss and distinguish and even argue about what the meaning of the Word is for us; because in that very discussion the Holy Spirit of God can work in us. We learn from each other when each Christian is allowed to try and wrestle with the word for our life.

Luther taught that the Bible contains both Law and Gospel. The main purpose of Law is to convict us of sin, but not so that we should despair and give up, but so that we would desire to come to God and cling to God’s promises in the Gospel.

So, where’s the problem? I think it shows up when some Christians use the word exclusively to condemn people, or to beat them up spiritually.

There is a well-known preacher, for example, who shows up at funerals and demonstrates outside with bullhorn and signs that say “God Hates Fags.” This preacher (and I don’t want to either defame him or dignify him by mentioning his name) believes he is speaking for God when he shouts out these condemning words.

But does God *really* condemn people? Who needs the Judgment Day, if you can just look up a section of the Bible and find it written there, that you’re already condemned, already damned for all eternity. Is that really true?

Before you beat yourself up, or go off to preach damnation against somebody else, be sure you know what you’re talking about. For, across the board, the message of Jesus is that God’s word is always an invitation, not an ultimatum. God’s voice always calls to us, with love, to come home, to come to our senses, to accept love, to seek peace, and to show mercy to others. The voice of God isn’t saying, you must do all those things or you are damned. The love of God is not an “or else” kind of thing.

Yes, some of those “noisy” preachers can flip and point to things in the Bible which seem to back them up, and to condemn things or people with uncompromising fierceness. But, before we get to that, remember that a Christian must decide for himself or herself if the word pertains to him – that is, if it universally applies to all people in all times and circumstances, or if it simply does not apply.

Here’s what Martin Luther said to this effect:

We must handle and apply Scripture with care. From the beginning the Word was given in many ways. We must not only see whether it is God’s Word, whether God spoke it, but, much more, to whom He spoke it, whether it applies to you or to another person. There the difference appears, a difference as great as between summer and winter. . . . The Word in Scripture is twofold: one is no concern of mine and does not apply to me. And on that which applies to me I may boldly act and rely, as on a solid rock. But if it does not apply to me, I should do nothing about it. The false prophets rush in and say: Dear people, this is the Word of God. What they say is true, and we cannot deny it; but we are not the people to whom God is speaking.¹

We, too, have to discern what applies and what doesn’t apply. Some things written in the Good Book simply have no application nowadays, but pertained to the people of ancient Israel, living in the promised land. Some things apply to the idolatry and practices of ancient peoples which no longer exist. Some *appear to be* universally condemning, or restricting, but as Luther argues, “we must “handle and apply Scripture with care.”

Let me give a contemporary example. St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 that women should be silent in the churches, for they are not to speak, but should be subordinate. He repeats this in 1 Timothy 2: 11–14. *Whoa!* How do we apply that saying? Is that really true? Is that really God’s word for women today?

Some Christian churches believe that this saying is universally applicable, so they will not permit women to become pastors and teachers, at least teachers *of adults* (a little “qualification” they have cooked up on their own so that women can still teach children!). It is clearly written in Paul’s sayings. it’s in the Bible—God’s word. So it seems there is no way to squirm out of it!

But now we know that Paul was terribly concerned not to cause public scandal, and so discouraged anything that would be against common standards of decency. It *was* considered scandalous in ancient times for women to do *anything at all* in public. So Paul counsels restraint, order and in the case of women, modesty, in both these passages. From what we know about everyday life in ancient times, it is clear that Paul is saying, “it is shameful [according to common standards of decency and modesty] for a woman to speak in church.”

Now, for the purpose of this example, how do we know that this is God’s universal word to *all* women in *all* times and places, *forever*? There will be differences of opinion among Christians on this! Thousands of Christians still think it is wrong for a woman to become a minister. The Roman Catholics forbid it. Some fundamentalist groups and sects forbid it. Millions of other Christians have prayerfully and carefully decided that Paul’s message about the place of women was being spoken in a context which no longer applies. And, of course, there are many other places in the New Testament that show us that women were very much involved in the ministry of the church. Priscilla was a leading evangelist who worked and traveled with her husband and the apostle Paul. And he mentions Junia as a leader among the apostles in Romans 16:7. And in Galatians 3:28, he clearly says that all the distinctions between people, whether they be Jewish or Greek, or slaves or free, or men and women, are irrelevant *in*

Christ.

So, there is ample reason to believe that Paul's modesty passages were not spoken as God's word universally. Just as the earliest Christians struggled to understand what was appropriate for them in their culture and in their times, so we too are encouraged to test and ask and question and even debate what is appropriate in our times and in our setting.

Today, women have run for President of the United States. They sit in Congress as colleagues with men. They run major corporations. They are stars in the movies, anchors on television news programs, professionals, entrepreneurs, inventors, business owners and managers.

I think it is fair to say that God's word, through Paul, was to caution the followers of Jesus not to let their behavior be the cause of scandals. But in a society where women are rapidly being accepted as full equals to men, it seems to me it would be *scandalous* to say that God wants women to remain silent. Such narrow views of God may actually scandalize the public's perception of the Bible, and cause many good people to lose faith. That would be a scandal.

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This should be as clear as an open window for us, shouldn't it? If God's word is just a book of warnings, scoldings, ultimatums, words that say “or else”, would that draw people to Christ? Would they come home to God? Or stay away out of fear?

There are many wonderful stories in the Gospels in which it is very clear that God invites, God draws, God welcomes, God gathers, God seeks us and wants us to come home. These are passages which remind and encourage us of God's unconditional love. We'll talk about these together at another time.

But let us not get discouraged that there is no value in the Bible, no truth in the Word of God. If there are some things we cannot clearly understand, perhaps in our conversation and discussion and yes, even arguments, we can together discern God's truth for our times. Steer clear of those preachers who try to force you up against a wall, or who tell you that you are already lost, or already damned. Don't believe it. But hang on to this one principle: **“God’s word for us is always an invitation, not an ultimatum.”**



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Notes:

1. *Luther's Works*, Weimar edition, 16, 384f - E 33, 16 – SL 3, 12 f

