

Is that what God really said?

by Rev. Robert Griffith

From the very beginning of the human race, the Word of God has been under attack. When God created humankind He spoke very clearly and gave specific instructions about how we should live. Then the archenemy of God – Satan – entered the Garden of Eden and asked Eve a question which he has continued to ask millions of times every day right across the world. *“Is that what God really said?”*

The moment God’s word was spoken, the enemy of God was there to question it, re-interpret it and undermine its authority. We know how that first encounter ended, don’t we? We stupid humans took the bait, believed the father of lies and effectively answered ‘no’ to this foundational question. Then we see on almost every page of the Old Testament the pattern is set: God speaks truth, the people follow for a while but encounter some obstacles and right at that point the same question arises, *“Is that what God really said?”* Every time the Truth of God is revealed, the enemies of Truth are there to question whether that is what God really said and they are quick to offer a different interpretation, just like the devil did for Eve.

Keep turning the pages into the New Testament and the same pattern is there. Jesus spoke the Truth and it was immediately questioned, opposed or twisted into something more palatable for the taste of the hearers. Long after Jesus returned to the Father’s side and the Church was established, this pattern continued – right up until today. When we preach the truth from the Scriptures and recount even the words of Jesus Himself, Satan’s question from the Garden of Eden rears its head again: *Is that what Jesus really said?”*

Tragically, in the modern Church, increasingly the answer to that question is ‘no’ and so the gospel which is preached is really no gospel at all. The Truth has always been under attack and the Bible, which articulates that truth, has therefore been under constant attack. It may be the most printed, most read, most prolific document on the planet, but it’s also the most attacked, ridiculed, twisted, misinterpreted, despised and dangerous book ever written. People’s lives are being destroyed and martyrs are dying every day because of the Truth of God’s word revealed to us in the Scriptures.

I could tell you hundreds of stories of the attacks which have come directly against me and indirectly against my family and my fellow Christians over the years as I have preached this Truth. It happens almost every Sunday in some way and last Sunday was certainly no exception! Some of those attacks can be agonising and incredibly damaging. But I can’t say I wasn’t warned.

It was 42 years ago this month when I knocked on the door of my Minister’s office and asked if I could have a chat to him about the call of God I was feeling and whether I should enter full time ministry. Rev. Ted Hayes from St. Johns Presbyterian Church in Orange sat and listened to my testimony as I told him of the growing conviction I had since I was 14 years old. When I finished sharing, he looked at me and said something which I have never forgotten.

He said, *“My advice to you is that you forget about this call you think you have and pursue your career and do everything you can to avoid entering full time ministry. Be the best lay preacher and leader you can. Remain in the work force and be salt and light and don’t even think about full time ordained ministry.”*

He could obviously see the shocked look on my face and so he continued. *“If however, after a few years, you find that this call just won’t go away; if you are completely unable to shake this conviction that you will only reach your life’s potential if you accept this call, then, and only then, should you become a Minister of the Word.”*

He then went on to tell me how many of his friends and colleagues had been chewed up and spat out because they responded to what they thought was the call of God and their ministries ended in disaster. He explained why he was trying to slow down my journey into ministry. He said,

“A Minister of the Word is called upon to teach and preach the most powerful, the most dangerous, the most controversial but the most important message this world has ever known. You will be the custodian of the Truth – God’s word - and that Truth got Jesus killed and millions of His followers since. That truth has destroyed families, ruined Ministers, divided communities, started wars and created mayhem across the world for centuries. And yet, that truth is the only thing which will set a man or woman totally, gloriously and eternally free. If God is truly calling you into this ministry, then it will be the hardest thing you will ever do and it may cost you your life – but it will be all worth it when you see God at work first-hand as He transforms people before your eyes through the truth you preach.”

As a result of that challenging encounter with my Minister that day, it was another 12 years before I finally entered college and responded to the call of God. I took Ted’s advice and built a successful career, but the call of God never went away.

There have been many, many times in ministry when I have recalled that warning about the power of God’s word and the impact the Truth can have when it is unleashed in a dysfunctional world. Jesus encountered opposition from everywhere when He preached and ministered all those years ago. Interestingly, the greatest opponents of that Truth were the insiders – the people who were supposedly God’s people already. In Jesus’ case it was the Pharisees and Sadducees. These were like the Senior Ministers of the day before Jesus arrived and they were His greatest critics and the ones who plotted with His worldly enemies to have Jesus arrested and executed. Old Ted was right, this Truth which sets people free is also a Truth which triggers great resistance and attacks from those who refuse to accept it.

As I shared in my sermon last week, wherever the Bible is taken seriously and the Truth within it is preached faithfully, there will be transformation of individual disciples and eventually entire communities. I encourage you to read about one such community in last week’s sermon if you missed it. However, whenever the Bible is taken seriously and preached faithfully, there will also be opposition, distraction and deception. The Truth which sets us free is also the Truth which confronts our fallen, desperate human condition and that often triggers conflict.

The Truth is always confrontational.

The truth about Jesus Christ is the most confrontational of all. His exclusive claims are offensive to the humanist mindset dominating this modern age of ‘inclusion.’ However, if there was any way to God other than through Christ, then Christ didn’t need to come and the entire Christian message is foolishness. If the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is not the only means by which we enter God’s Kingdom, then why did He come and why did He have to die? You may already embrace Jesus’ exclusive claim to be the way, the truth, the life and the only means by which we can be reconciled to God. Most of you grew up listening to preaching like that. If that’s where you still are - hallelujah! May God strengthen your faith in that foundational truth and protect you from the tsunami of false teaching which is unleashing on our Church and challenging that truth and many others every day.

That's right, we have preachers in pulpits across this land who do not believe Jesus is the only way to God. They do not believe that the exclusive claim of Jesus in John 14:6 is what Jesus 'really' said. Some modern-day preachers don't actually believe that Jesus died in our place and exchanged His righteousness for our sin – in so doing they wipe out more than half our hymns and songs and most of the New Testament!

It's even worse than that. Some theological colleges are actually teaching this stuff and deliberately churning out preachers and ministers who no longer embrace the foundational, fundamental truths of Who Christ is and what He has done. The Bible is being butchered as revisionist scholars completely re-interpret the basic tenants of our faith so they are more 'culturally sensitive' and compatible with modern, 'enlightened' thinking. The Truth Jesus brought was counter-cultural and in stark contrast to the wisdom of the world.

That same Bible which is being ignored or misinterpreted warned us this would happen. The Apostle Paul said in the last days there would be doctrines taught by demons (1 Tim. 4:1) and that people in the Church would surround themselves with teachers who gave them what their itching ears wanted to hear, rather than the truth (2 Tim. 4:3). So let me remind you of the Truth, without which we don't have a Church.

Jesus said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6).

The Apostle Peter took Jesus' words and carried them forward when he boldly stood before the political and religious leaders of the land and declared: *"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

Jesus also said, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."* (John 3:16-18)

Jesus made it even clearer when He said, *"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved."* (John 10:9)

The Apostle Paul, who wrote half the New Testament, pulls no punches when he declares that salvation is found in no one other than Christ: *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"* (2 Cor. 5:17).

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 6:23).

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." (Acts 16:21).

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." (Rom. 5:1-2).

For through him (Jesus) we have access in one Spirit to the Father." (Eph.2:18).

"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom. 10:9).

“There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.” (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21).

“... through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” (Rom. 8:2)

I could go on and on ... page after page in the Bible ... verse upon verse which all say the same thing: Yes! Jesus did really say that He is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father unless they embrace the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as their own, by faith, and are transformed by that powerful gospel – and the free gift of salvation found only in Christ. All of the New Testament and all of the early creeds and theological foundations of the early Church were build upon that cornerstone, that bedrock truth that Jesus is the ONLY way to God and the door to eternal life in God’s kingdom.

We can have all the inter-faith dialogues we like with Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and other faiths – it’s essential we build relationships with all people - so that we can introduce them to Jesus Who is the Lord of all Creation and the only mediator between us and God. That is the Truth. That is the Gospel. More precisely, Jesus is the Truth. Jesus is the Gospel. Jesus is God. Jesus is our only Saviour. Jesus is Lord, whether we recognise that Truth or ignore it – Jesus is still Lord.

Now is that truth confrontational for a devout Muslim? You bet it is! But it’s still the truth and if we really claim to love our Muslim brothers and sisters then why would we give them anything but the truth - especially when we know that this truth will not judge them like their own Koran does - this Truth will set them powerfully and gloriously free in Christ! No longer will they be trying to perform to please God and earn their eternal reward – they, like us, can declare they are spiritually bankrupt and will never please God.

By contrast to all performance-based religion, God asks us to embrace Jesus - the One Who always pleases God and has written our name on His report card and handed it to the Father in heaven. *I once was blind, but now I see! ... I once was lost, but now I am free!*” Only in Christ can we say that! Now that’s just one example of the importance and authority of Scripture. It just happens to be the most important. What the Bible says about Jesus and our salvation is the most important truth to embrace. It’s the gospel – the good news – the doorway through which we encounter God and God’s kingdom.

But the Bible says heaps about us and our lives and sin and the Church and the importance of sound doctrine and selfless love always walking in step. Grace and truth – like two railway tracks or two sides of the same coin – should never be set against each other. Sadly, we hear lots about grace in some parts of the Church today and less and less about truth.

Grace without truth is not God’s grace and it leads to apostasy. Truth without grace is not God’s truth and it leads to hard-hearted legalism.

Both extremes are a blight on the Church, but I fear that truth is under far more attack than grace at this time in our Church’s history and that’s because truth is always confrontational and some preachers just don’t want to confront people and most people don’t like being confronted. And yet, it was Jesus Himself Who said that truth will set us free and Jesus was never afraid to confront error and speak the truth.

In this Church I am called a *Minister of the Word*. There are thousands of Ministers of the Word in the Uniting Church. But what does that term really mean? What is 'the Word?' Some say it's the word of God as articulated in the Bible. Others say it is the Word Who was with God from the beginning and is God: Jesus Christ. Well it's both really. First and foremost I am a Minister of Christ. There is only one mission: the mission of Christ and that mission has a Church which Christ promised to build and He has called me to join Him in fulfilling His mission to seek and save the lost. So I am a Minister of Christ.

But in order to be Minister of the Word, Who is Christ, I must also be a Minister of the Bible which reveals the Word to us on almost every page. So the moment I allow the Scriptures to take a back seat or to be undermined, misinterpreted, corrupted or denied, then I am no longer a Minister of the Word. The moment I allow something other than Jesus Christ and His mission to be the central focus and the entire purpose of the Church, I am no longer a Minister of the Word.

So I want to make it really clear that my calling from God and my purpose in being here is to be a Minister of the Word and I cannot and will not compromise that calling. If, at any point in time, my calling and my commitment to the Truth, Jesus Christ, comes into conflict with others in the Church, I must continue to speak the Truth. I will do so with love, compassion, sensitivity and grace, but the day I decide to back away from that calling; the day I compromise or ignore that Truth, is the day I resign.

I feel this so strongly because I know what happens when people compromise the Truth in order to please men and women and appeal to the cultural trends around us. Look at the Church across this nation today and you can clearly see what happens when the Truth is corrupted, twisted or ignored. The result is a divided, fragmented, irrelevant and powerless Church. When the 'word' we are preaching is not the Word of God: Jesus Christ, then we cannot expect transformation in our society.

So how do we get back to those days when the Church was growing rapidly and was salt and light in the flavourless darkness of the world? How do we ensure that our grandchildren's future even has a Church?

How do we here in Lismore guarantee that we have not just spent hundreds of thousands of dollars creating a beautiful, new multi-purpose Worship and Ministry centre which will be empty soon when we're all gone? Quite simply, we just need to answer YES again to this question, "*Is that what God really said?*" So many leaders, scholars, teachers and even Ministers have been effectively answering 'no' for too long and the Church as we know it is shrinking and dying. Why should we be surprised?

I can still see the sticker I put on the dashboard of my very first car. It read: "*God said it. I believe it. That settles it.*" Some of my passengers read that sticker and probably thought I was naive about life – it really can't be that simple. YES IT CAN. The world would be a very different place if Adam and Eve had turned to Satan and said, "*Yes, that is exactly what God said and we believe it, so get out of our Garden!*" The world would be a very different place if every preacher, indeed every child of God throughout history had continued to answer YES to this simple question: *Is that what God really said?*

Is there a cost in answering yes? Of course there is! Believing God's truth can cause great tension and conflict in families and whole communities. Jesus warned us that following Him and accepting His word would be costly. But what alternative do we have? Our own eyes and ears confirm what happens to the Church and the world around us when we answer no to this question and re-interpret or reject what God has said. Jesus warned us that the way is narrow and the path is at times treacherous if we choose to follow Him. But that path leads to the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven.

There is no point praying, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..” unless we also say yes to this question and travel that narrow path – for that is the way God’s will is done on earth and all of heaven is released in our midst when we say yes to this question and live within the truth of what God has really said!

My prayer now for you all and for the whole Church, is the same as Paul’s prayer for his brothers and sisters in Ephesus and I would like to pray this over our Church right now:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people, and His incomparably great power for us who believe.

That power is the same as the mighty strength He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.

(Ephesians 1:17-23)