



Staying on the Line

What it means to go above or below the exacting line of truth.

by David Helm

Years ago I was summoned to give testimony at a murder trial. The clerk had me raise my right hand and said—you know the words—"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" I did. I sat down, and I spoke.

There was a day when you took your vow to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. That is the oath we are to uphold—the line of Scripture. It's difficult, isn't it? It's easy to rise above the line by adding your words to God's Word. We're also susceptible to falling below the line, wherein we say less than God is saying. We can either add to his Word or take from his Word, and yet we have vowed to uphold it.

Deuteronomy 4 begins:

And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. (esv)

And here's the text for our lesson today:

You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.

You don't add and you don't subtract, so you might keep the line, the Word. The Word is to mediate. When you add to the Word, the Word is no longer mediating. Therefore, you're no longer keeping. When you take away from the Word, it's no longer mediating. Therefore, you're no longer keeping. Do not add, do not subtract, that you might keep the line, the commands.

God's preacher in the Garden of Eden failed to hold the line

Genesis 3:1-3:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

Before going further I want to make two observations on Satan and Eve. There's a critical distinction. Satan's misuse of God's words is wicked and evil, but Eve's is not. Satan's misuse of God's words is intentional. It's calculated. It is a distortion meant to ridicule God's character. Martin Luther said something to the effect that this is not a question put forward; it's an accusation made. Think of it this way: I have a 14-year-old son. Let's say I tell him he has to be in by 11 o'clock. His friend says, "What time do you have to be in?" He says, "I have to be in by 11." "Did your dad really say you have to be in by 11?" Is he asking a question? No, he's actually impugning my character. He's saying to my son, "Your father's not good." And that's wicked.

Satan's desire, then, is to get Eve to doubt that God's character is good. And in doubting God's character, she would disobey God's voice. That is consistent throughout the Scriptures, and it is

consistent in your life. Satan's tactics are predictable. He will subtly accuse the character of God's goodness that you might leave off the Word. And it's wicked.

Eve's inability to stay on the line, however, is more understandable. Let's face it: Eve was not like Satan. Eve's addition is similar to what parents say to their kids: "If you don't go near the edge of the cliff, you'll never have to worry about falling off." "If you don't ever put your hand on the stove, you'll never have to worry about being burned." Eve thought: *I know I'm not supposed to eat it, so I'm going to tell myself I can't touch it.* That's understandable. She's building hedges. But it has a wicked ending.

Eve was in need of a preacher; not necessarily one who would judge her rebellion, but one who would safeguard her relationship with God. Eve's danger at this point is that she will turn her relationship with God into a religion in which she performs rules to appease God. So where Satan is in rebellion, Eve is on the verge of bringing in religion.

Wouldn't it have been great if a preacher had been there that day? Oh, but there was. See Genesis 3:6: "her husband, who was with her." God, in his providence, knows the world will need a preacher before the Fall, and he secures a preacher. So when the question is raised, he has a man under oath who will judge the Evil One once and for all, and who will safeguard the relationship between his family—that is the church at that point—and keep religion from entering the world.

Notice, the Word given to Adam in Genesis 2:16 is before the creation of the woman in 2:18. So God had seen the need for a preacher, and he had supplied the world with his preacher. All Adam needs to do now is enter into the courtroom. He needs to raise his right hand, and he needs to say, "I do solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. And the truth is this: Satan, your word is wicked and evil. I condemn it and judge it. You now await God's judgment upon you. Eve, your word is deceptive and will bring religion into the world. In my safeguarding of you, I will not allow it. God did not say, 'Do not touch.'"

Adam needs to stand and preach. Does he plow a straight path here? Does he stay on the line? Genesis 3:6 is one of the saddest verses in the Bible: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he"—preached? No—"he ate."

This is God's man, who was created and called to preach. This is God's man, who from this garden was to plant the kingdom of God to the end of the earth. This is God's man, who was to keep God's Word and mediate life through the Word. This is God's man, who was to ascend into the pulpit, close the door behind him, lock himself in, and tell the truth.

Instead of ascending the stairs and speaking for God, he descends into sin. He succumbs to the power of Satan. He participates in the deception of Eve. He gives Satan the victory. He gives religion a foothold. And humanity has been plagued from this moment forth. There are to our day people who do Satan's bidding. They are bent on abject rebellion against God; they hate his character, and they will assail it before all they see. And there are people entrapped by Eve's deception; they are bent on appeasing God by their religious practice.

On that day the line of Scripture is made void. The line is broken. God does not have a preacher in the world. So God becomes his own preacher and defends his own Word. That's what happens in Genesis 3:14-15. God speaks and judges the serpent. He speaks in verse 16 and judges the woman. And in verses 17-19 God speaks to Adam, and he holds him accountable for everything. The ground is now subject to the curse, and the preacher is now subject to the ground. And the garden ground from which Adam was to cultivate the kingdom to the end of the earth is a cemetery plot, which man must leave until he descends into that ground on the day of his death.

God's preachers in the Old Testament failed to hold the line

God was without a preacher in the world in the early chapters of the Bible, outside of a few exceptions. You can go to Enoch. You can go to Noah. But in large part God is his own voice. There is no preacher. In fact, he's still speaking for himself when he calls his people out at Mount Sinai. It's his voice: "And God said..."

On that day the people were terrified when they heard God preaching. They said in Deuteronomy 18: We're going to die if we hear you preach. God says: Then I'll give you a preacher, and it will be a man from your own people, and it will be a prophet. And I'll put my words in his mouth and—what?—he will speak what I command him.

Moses is that great prophet, but even Moses the great prophet falters on the line of Scripture. In Numbers 20:8, God told Moses, "Take the staff and tell the rock..." That's a pretty simple outline. But in verse 11 Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice. He faltered on the line of Scripture. What was the dilemma? Verse 12: "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." Moses' failure was that he did not regard God's word and holiness to hold sway on the people. He cheapened God in the eyes of the people.

So the great prophet faltered. The great priests of the Old Testament faltered. The priests weren't even supposed to speak. They just used sign language. Aaron's sons had that privileged position of sign language before the congregation, but they went in with strange fire, it says in Leviticus 10. *I'm in the privileged position. I'm going to sign this way today.* They presumed on their position.

The great priests failed, and the great kings failed as well. First Samuel 15 is one of the saddest chapters in Scripture. First Samuel 15:3:

Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.

That was according to the words of the Lord. But in verses 9-11:

But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen...and would not utterly destroy them.

Go to verse 13:

Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord."

I'm holding the line of Scripture. Was this a good day for God's people or what? They were happy when they left church.

Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?...Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king."

Only Christ held the line of Scripture

The great prophets, the great priests, the great kings—they failed to hold the line. It wasn't until the eternal Word of God, who was present with God from the beginning, took on human flesh that the line was held. By chapter 4 of Matthew you know this is the Man, because when he goes

into the desert for those 40 days, whereas Moses sinned by manipulating the Word, bringing water from a rock according to his own desires, Jesus does not succumb to the temptation to make bread from rocks. Whereas the great priests failed because they had presumption in the place of sacrifice, thinking God would not kill them, Jesus does not succumb to that, refusing to throw himself off the high place as if God will obfuscate his Word and save him anyway. Jesus does not succumb to the temptation of Saul and David and every other king. He does not take human kingdoms upon his own word. He does not succumb to the temptation to bow to Satan's word to receive the kingdom. He holds the line. He alone does the hard and taxing work of being a biblical preacher.

See how hard it was for him. This was not easy work. In Matthew 19:3 the Pharisees are going away from the line: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" There's that word *any* again.

Look at what Jesus does in verse 4. First of all, he answers, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?" He goes to Genesis 1. He says: I do solemnly swear to tell the truth, the truth of Genesis 1. Then he says: I'm going to tell you the whole truth, the truth of Genesis 2: "'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.'" So they are no longer two but one flesh." He tells the truth of God's Word, he tells the whole truth, and then he tells nothing but the truth in Matthew 19:6b: "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

You'd think they'd be grateful for a man who could hold the line of Scripture. But they weren't, in verse 7: "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" They're trying to put Jesus' truth statement, which is grounded in Genesis 1 and 2, at odds with Moses' truth statement, which is grounded in Deuteronomy 24. It's sophisticated. The same thing is going on today. This is sophisticated work. People will pit one place in God's Word against another place in God's Word.

Jesus says: I'm not playing that game. We have a lot to learn from him here on how to deal with current dilemmas such as same-sex union. Your apologetic is there in Matthew 19:8: "He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.'" He says: I'm going to hold Moses, and I'm going to hold God's created intention, and I will not let them war.

In fact, verse 9: "I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." What's he doing here? He's saying: You're not going to put me at war with God's created intention and Moses' exception. I'm going to put you at war with both, because your principle is an easy, no-fault divorce, and that's against Genesis 1 and 2, and that's against Deuteronomy 24.

That's what Jesus does. That's what you are called to do, and that is how you hold the line. That is why Jesus could say before Pilate: I've come to testify to the truth. That is why on the cross he is the great prophet speaking, and his resurrection validates that he is God's King.

God calls his preachers today to hold the line

What's amazing is that God gives this ministry to you and me. We are fallen men. We are sons of Adam. But he asks you to preach. 2 Corinthians 4:1-2:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's Word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

And then 2 Timothy 2:15:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth.

Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. God still needs a preacher in the world.

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David Helm is a pastor and church planter of Holy Trinity Church in Chicago, and is on the board of the Charles Simeon Trust. He delivered this message at the 2003 Workshop on Biblical Exposition sponsored by College Church in Wheaton, Illinois.