

I Believe in Not Altering God's Word

Barry O'Dell

The definition of *alter* is, “change or cause to change in character or composition, typically in a comparatively small, but significant way.” As Israel was approaching the Promised Land, she came near Moab (Num. 22). In fear, the Moabites said, “Now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field” (Num. 22:4). Out of fear, Balak, king of the Moabites, sought Balaam to come and curse the people of Israel (Num. 22:5-6). God told Balaam, “Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people; for they are blessed” (Num. 22:12). In the back-and-forth with the messengers from Balak, Balaam said, “If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or more” (Num. 22:18). What a powerful statement!

The concept of not adding to the word of God is found throughout the entirety of Scripture. Micaiah, a prophet during the days of Ahab said, “As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak” (1 Kg. 22:14). Satan began, in the beginning, to cast doubt on the words of God (Gen. 3:1). Since that time men have, for a variety of reasons, been willing to alter God’s word. Moses said, “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish aught from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you” (Deut. 4:2). Notice the implication of that verse - If you add to or take away from the word of God, you cannot keep the commandments of the Lord. That was true under the Mosaic dispensation. There are many passages in the Old Testament that reiterate this warning. Notice Deuteronomy 12:32: “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.” Agur wrote, “Every word of God is pure: He is a shield unto them that put their trust in Him. Add thou not unto His words, lest He reprove thee, and thou be found a liar” (Pro. 30:5-6).

As one opens the pages of the New Testament, it becomes very clear that Israel had failed to do what Moses and Agur advised. For instance, in Matthew 15 we read of Jesus rebuking the Pharisees for making the “commandment of God of none effect by your tradition” (Matt. 15:6). They had added their traditions to the word of God and, having done so,

were not able to keep the commandments of God as noted earlier in this article (Deut. 4:2). In regard to the contents of the book of Revelation to the seven churches of Asia John wrote, “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (Rev. 22:18-19).

In the times of the early church, the primary altering of God’s word was in the form of Judaism. Chapters such as Acts 15 reveal to us that people from a Jewish background were constantly attempting to add certain aspects of Judaism to the gospel. Many New Testament chapters are dedicated to the fact that Christians were “dead to the law by the body of Christ” (Rom. 7:4). The first covenant was done away so that the second might be established (Heb. 8:6-7). For some to bind the necessity of circumcision to the salvation of the soul was to teach something foreign to the gospel of Christ (Gal. 5:1-6). God is not the author of confusion and He did not have different people following different laws concurrently.

What about today? What are some ways that people alter the word of God - either by adding to it or taking away from it? In terms of adding to the word of God, we have the existence of denominationalism and denominational dogmas. The Westminster Confession of Faith, for instance, is a massive addition to the word of God. Denominational by-laws and constitutions are additions to the word of God. Any creed book or catechism is an addition to the inspired word of God and, as such, should be rejected! In terms of taking away from the word of God, there are many who would have us believe that baptism is not necessary for salvation. That is to take away from very plain passages of Scripture (1 Pet. 3:21). I suppose the answers could go on and on!

There is an old saying that is applicable here: “If it says more than the Bible, it says too much. If it says less than the Bible, it doesn’t say enough. If it says what the Bible says, we don’t need it.” May we always remain true to the word of God and never, in any way, attempt to alter it.

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Some folks boast: “Well, if I were omnipotent, I would...” (fill in the blank). These do not understand the nature of God. Yes, God is omnipotent, but that does not mean that God has not limited Himself. If one had all power and used it only for his own selfish desires, one would never understand love and sacrifice. I am grateful that the One Who has all power also has the perfect and upright character and nature to wield that power morally, ethically, and beneficially. His holiness channels His power to only do that which is holy and right.

Our context comes from Israel’s historical march through the wilderness after God’s great and grand deliverance from Egyptian captivity. Israel cried out to God for deliverance, so God raised up a deliverer from among the people, Moses. In our text, Deuteronomy 3, God had delivered Og, a remnant of the giants, into the hands of Israel (Deut. 3:1-11). They saw God work through them to conquer Sihon, “king of Heshbon, utterly destroying the men, women, and children of every city” (v. 6). Israel had experienced God’s power at every hand! From the ten plagues in their departure from Egypt (Ex. 7-11) to the Red Sea crossing (Ex. 14), and God’s continued care in the wilderness, they saw God’s power! Their clothes did not wear out and their sandals did not cause blisters or swelling on their feet (Deut. 8:4; 29:5). A “Rock” followed them, providing water for their needs, and God blesses them with manna from heaven (Ex. 16; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-11). They followed a pillar of smoke by day and of fire by night for forty years (Ex. 13:21). They even heard the voice of God at Sinai (Ex. 20).

Most read over these verses and never realize the amazing connections to the Savior. We must remember that God made a promise to Abraham (Gen. 12). In that threefold promise God swore to make of Abraham a mighty nation (Israel), to give them the land on which Abraham’s feet had trod, and to bless all nations through Abraham’s Seed, Jesus (Rom. 7:14; Gal. 3:16). When we read of God’s great power displayed through His development and protection of Israel, we should stand in awe of the fact that it was for the purpose of saving each of us (Titus 1:2; Eph. 1:4). The plan God had from the creation of the world was being fulfilled in Israel’s development into a nation, for the purpose of bringing Jesus into the world at exactly the right time (Gal. 4:4). Just think about it, God was able to weave His will through the millennia, working through the rise and fall of nations, choices people would make for good or ill, even among those who were rebellious, to accomplish His will in bringing Jesus into this world to be offered for man

(Isa. 9:6-7: “*the zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this*” – Cf. Acts 2:23-24). Through this, God demonstrated the greatest love and sacrifice man has ever known (Rom. 5:8-9; John 15:13; 3:16). Truly, we love Him because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19).

Through Christ’s sacrifice God’s righteousness was on display and the power of the Gospel is declared (Rom. 1:16-17). The promised Christ was offered for each one of us, dying for sin, being buried, and then resurrected for our justification (1 Cor. 15:1-4; Rom. 1:4; 4:25). Through the power of the Gospel there is salvation from sins past (Rom. 6:1-7; Rom. 3:24-25; 2 Pet. 1:9). Through the power of the Gospel there is deliverance from sins present (Col. 3:1-17; Phil. 3:10). Through the Gospel we learn what sin is (1 Jn. 3:4), we learn what repentance is (Matt. 21:28-31), and we experience the power of God unto salvation from the life we once lived to the life God calls us to in Christ Jesus (Lk. 9:23). God delivers one from their own personal “Egypt,” or captivity to sin, and sets them on the journey to the promised land. He equips one for the battles (Eph. 6:10-18). We are to **trust** in the power of God to see us through to our own inheriting of the promised land, the place prepared for us from the foundation of the world (Jn. 14:1-3; Matt. 25:34).

Israel experienced God’s power but failed to trust God (Num. 13). When the time came to obey God’s directive and enter the promised land as God’s tool of judgment on the nations (Gen. 15:16) they balked, they doubted God’s power and they wandered 40 years in the wilderness until everyone from that generation died, having never been able to enter the promised land (Heb. 3:15-19). Moses too was disallowed from entering the promised land. His transgression was in not sanctifying God in the sight of the people by striking the rock instead of speaking to it and saying: “Must we give you water” (Num. 20:9-12). He later pled with God to allow him to enter the promised land, even extolling God’s greatness and might. Yet, God told him: “Enough of that! Speak no more to Me of this matter” (Deut. 3:26). His sin kept him out! Our unrepentant sin will keep us out of the “promised land.” May we learn this valuable lesson: “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God...” (Heb. 3:12). Remember, one can experience the power of God’s salvation and still be drawn back to the world of sin and lose out on entry into the promised land (2 Pet. 2:20-22; Heb. 6:4-6; cf. 2 Pet. 1:11). May we trust in the salvation God offers through Christ, His providential care and concern for each of us, and the promise regarding His will that we “can do all things through Christ who strengthens” us (Phil. 4:13).

David McCullough, in his book *Mornings On Horseback*, tells an interesting story about young Teddy Roosevelt. Mittie, his mother, had found he was so afraid of the Madison Square Church that he refused to set foot inside alone. He was terrified of something called the "zeal." It was crouched in the dark corners of the church ready to jump at him, he said. When she asked what a zeal might be, he said he was not sure but thought it was probably a large animal like an alligator or a dragon. He had heard the minister read about it from the Bible. Using a concordance, she read him those passages containing the word ZEAL until suddenly, very excited, he told her to stop. The line was from the Book of John, "*And his disciples remembered that it was written, 'The ZEAL of thine house hath eaten me up.'*" We are not expected to be frightened by the presence of the Lord. However, we must have a healthy amount of fear and reverence in the presence of the Lord.

Christians should have a healthy fear of the Lord. The Bible says, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction*" (Pro. 1:7). Here, Solomon points out the connection between a fear of the Lord and the possession of knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge pertains to an understanding of the facts of truth. Wisdom is the ability to apply those facts to life and use them properly. So then, attaining wisdom and knowledge is about learning how to view life properly. This ability enables us to make the most of our lives. The "beginning" of wisdom and knowledge is a fear of the Lord. To fear God is the first and most important step on the path to making the best use of our lives. Without fear of the Lord, our lives will never reach their full potential.

Still, what does it mean to fear the Lord? Sure, to have a fear of the Lord does not mean that we are so frightened of Him that we dread being in His presence. This kind of fear will cripple us spiritually rather than motivate us to do our best. "The fear of the Lord" has basically two elements. First of all, a fear of the Lord is a healthy fear of God's displeasure and discipline. We cannot forget that God is a just God. His justice demands that sins which are not forgiven must be punished. Sin cannot enter heaven, so sin which is not forgiven must be punished in hell. We should have a healthy amount of fear regarding that reality. Peter wrote, "*And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile*" (1 Pet. 1:17). When we think of God as judge, it will produce a reverence and respect of Him. We fear

the prospect of His wrath.

The second element of the "fear of the Lord" is a respectful love which earnestly desires to please God. God has done much to demand our respect. He is our Creator, Provider, and Savior. Without Him, we would have nothing and be nothing. His love motivated Him to sacrifice His only-begotten Son for us. God's love should motivate us to respectfully return His love. Solomon wrote, "*The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man*" (Ecc. 12:13). Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*" (Jn. 14:15). In these two passages, both a fear of the Lord and love for the Lord are connected to obedience of God's commandments. This shows the connection between fear and love. To fear God is to love God and have a burning passion to please Him in all that we say, think, and do.

A lack of fear will eventually produce a lack of restraint. When we do not respect God, we will have no motivation to live according to His direction. Morality is absent where fear of God is absent in a person's heart. Without fear of God, a man will flirt with evil and be corrupted by it. He will not be motivated to repent of his sins and seek forgiveness. Paul attributed the sinfulness of the ancient Gentiles to the fact that "*There is no fear of God before their eyes*" (Rom. 3:18). Joseph was able to resist the temptations of Potiphar's wife because he refused to commit great wickedness before God (Gen. 39:9). Fear of God motivated him to restrain his urges. The Bible says, "*...by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil*" (Pro. 16:6). Also, the Bible says, "*The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate*" (Pro. 8:13). Sin is a disappointment and aggravation to God. The one who fears God does not want to disappoint God. Therefore, he will passionately resist the temptation to sin. So then, we would do well to develop a healthy fear of the Lord in our hearts. The Bible teaches us that faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17). Fear also comes by hearing the word of God. Moses gave this command, "*...you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess*" (Deu. 31:10-13). Every sermon, lesson, and period of Bible study should deepen our fear and respect for the Lord.

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- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, though faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Hear, belief, baptism (Acts 18:8)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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