



## Jesus' Sheep Know His Voice by Brian Watson

*We envision a congregation whose love for Jesus and one another leaves a clear and compelling witness for Christ.*

Can people still be Christians when they don't believe that all of the Bible is true? Can a Christian disagree with parts of God's Word?

I have asked these questions because I continually see people who consider themselves Christians deny certain teachings in the Bible. These teachings include what the Bible says about sexuality, the deity of Christ, the exclusivity of Christ (faith in him is the only way to be saved), and the reality of hell. "Christians" who deny these teachings include not only lay people, but also ministers. I could give you example upon example, yet I think we all have seen this. Sadly, in many churches, the things taught each week directly contradict what the Bible says.

In all these cases, do the ones who deny God's Word know God? Can one be a Christian and fail to believe in parts of the Bible?

These are vital questions that must be answered, and they are questions that will always need answering because ever since Eden, people have been questioning the authority of God's Word. Let me first make an important distinction: all of us fail to obey God's Word perfectly. But that is very different from believing that parts of the Bible are wrong. I always agree with God that his Word is true, but I also realize that I struggle to obey what I know to be true (wretched man that I am!). I see that my sin is inexcusable because I know that God's Word is true. Nor am I talking about people who have legitimate differences in interpreting various passages of Scripture. Many people who recognize the Bible as true and authoritative have different ideas about how to interpret some things. I am talking about people who reject some of the Bible's clear teachings.

When we read the Bible, we see numerous comments about two groups of people. There are people who hear the voice/words of God and respond in faith, and there are people who ignore God's voice/words, to their peril. This is a major theme in book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah's ministry occurred during the last years of the kingdom of Judah, before it was conquered by Babylon. The reason why the kingdom fell was because the people failed to listen to and obey God. Just look at a few passages in Jeremiah:

"To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the LORD is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it." (Jeremiah 6:10)

"But this command I gave them: 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.' But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. . . . I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck." (Jeremiah 7:23-26)

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my

words." (Jeremiah 19:15)

"Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the LORD.' Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them." (Jeremiah 23:31-32)

From those passages, we see that God gave the people his Word through the prophets, yet the people refused to listen. Instead, they listened to lying, false prophets. Because they didn't listen, God was going to bring disaster upon them, which he finally did when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, slaughtered many Jews, and took many others captive into exile.

The people didn't listen because their ears were uncircumcised. Elsewhere, it says their hearts were not circumcised (Jer. 4:4). Whenever you see circumcision language used in such a way, it refers to one's spiritual status. Those who have been born again have circumcised hearts (Rom. 2:28-29). There is a clear connection between listening, faith, and obedience. When people aren't attuned to God's Word, it is a sign that they probably don't know God.

One clear New Testament passage that speaks to this issue is John 10. Here are some of the words of Jesus in that chapter:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I am the good shepherd.

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## Jesus' Sheep Know His Voice (*continued*)

I know my own and my own know me . . . And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. . . . My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:11, 14, 16, 27, 28).

Those who belong to Jesus' flock know his voice. They know it and they follow what he says. Jesus says that those who love him obey him (John 14:15, 21, and 23). Keeping Jesus' commandments presupposes recognizing them and believing them. Some people might claim that not all of the Bible is Jesus' voice or commandments. However, Jesus is God (John 20:28; Rom. 9:5), and God is one (Deut. 6:4; James 2:19). All Scripture is breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16), which is to say that all of it belongs to God. We cannot say, "This passage is from the Father, and these are Jesus' words, and this comes from the Holy Spirit." Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are called "Scripture" (see 1 Tim. 5:18, which quotes both Old and New Testament verses as Scripture; and 2 Pet. 3:15-16, which refers to Paul's letters as Scripture). All of the Bible is the Father speaking through the Word by the Spirit.

So, if all of the Bible is God's Word, and God's people are known by how they respond to that Word, then shouldn't all of this be quite clear? True Christians believe all of the Bible is true, because God's Word is true (John 17:17), and they act on that knowledge of truth. Why then do we have people who claim to be Christians yet deny God's Word?

We must remember that there is another spirit at work in the world (Eph. 2:2; 1 John 4:3). This is Satan, who is the father of all lies (John 8:44). As I have said in recent

sermons, he has many children, and they lie. We see plenty of liars in the world and in the Word. In the New Testament, warnings about false teachers abound, passages like 1 John 4:1, which speaks of false prophets, or all of 2 Peter 2, which describes false teachers. Peter's words about false teachers are very relevant today: "For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved" (2 Pet. 2:18-19). Jude has similar words: "Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. . . . But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively" (Jude 8, 10). Paul understood that false teachers were preaching a different Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4) and a different gospel (Gal. 1:8). False teaching about God will be with us until Jesus returns and judges those false teachers, condemning them for eternity.

I believe there are a few reasons why we should understand that God's people must believe God's Word. One reason concerns loving our neighbors. We all know people who consider themselves to be Christians yet don't believe that all of the Bible is true. If we love our neighbors—our family members, friends, coworkers, and anyone else we meet—we will tell them that rejecting God's Word is serious. In fact, if they are doing so, there's a real reason to doubt whether they are truly Christians. We must not neglect the doctrine of regeneration, which teaches that a Christian is one who is born again by the Holy Spirit, who then indwells the believer as a seal, as a guarantee of future inheritance (John 3; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13-14).

It seems quite natural that the indwelling Spirit would lead the believer to believe the Spirit's Word. Of course, it could be that the new believer doesn't trust all of God's Word the way a mature believer does, but the process of sanctification should include a growing love and belief in the Bible.

Another reason to be concerned about this issue is for our sake. Do we believe that all of the Bible is true? Thomas Jefferson rather famously made his own version of the Gospels, cutting out all the supernatural elements so that only Jesus' moral teachings remained. He cut out all miracles, including the resurrection. We condemn Jefferson's editing, and rightly so. Yet how many of us make our own version of the Bible by reading only certain parts? And those of us who read and believe all of God's Word often fail to obey. Knowing the right thing to do and failing to do it is a sin (James 4:17).

When people doubt that God's Word is true, or when they fail to obey God's commandments, I think it is because there is doubt that God's Word is good. God is gracious to reveal himself to us in Scripture and he is gracious to tell us to do what is best. There is joy in following Jesus and obeying his commands. And God's Word itself brings us joy. Psalm 119, which is all about Scripture, says, "Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart" (v. 11). John tells us, "And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (1 John 1:4). Interestingly, some manuscripts say "your joy." I'm sure both are true: John's joy was completed by writing Scripture, and our joy is completed by reading Scripture.

Let us sheep follow our great Shepherd by knowing his voice, listening carefully to him, and following what he says. In that way, our joy will be complete.