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## Why You Need Sound Doctrine 1 & 2 Timothy & Titus

Certain words and phrases elicit from us either pleasant or unpleasant responses. In the winter, the word “warm” makes us feel cozy. In the summer, the word “cool” refreshes us. The word “love” usually brings forth good feelings, unless you’ve just been dumped, in which case it may leave a bitter aftertaste in your mouth.

How does the word “doctrine” make you feel? How about “theology”? For most Christians, if they’re honest, those words are neutral at best, but probably on the negative side of the scale. They would associate “doctrine” and “theology” with words like, “dry,” “boring,” or, even worse, “divisive,” “unloving,” “intolerant.” We live in a day of subjective, experience-oriented Christianity where the good words are “love,” “unity,” “acceptance,” and “tolerance.”

Part of the source of this prevailing Christian climate, I believe, is our secular culture. We live in a culture where tolerance is seen as the chief virtue and relativism as our only absolute truth. The late University of Chicago professor, Allan Bloom, forcefully pointed this out in the introductory chapter of his 1987 best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind* [Simon and Schuster]. He wrote (p. 25),

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students’ reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question  $2 + 2 = 4$ . These are things you don’t think about.

Along with this commitment to relativity goes their allegiance to equality, along with the chief virtue, tolerance. Bloom points out that it has been taught as assumed dogma for more than the past 50 years that relativism is necessary for openness, and that openness is the only plausible stance in light of various claims to truth. “The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather

it is not to think you are right at all" (p. 26). After all, what right do I or anyone else have to say that my view is better than anyone else's view? This is especially true in the matter of religion and morals, which have been relegated to the realm of opinion as opposed to knowledge (p. 28). Everyone is free to have their religious opinions, but it's arrogant to say, "My religious view is right and all others are wrong."

Religion pollster, George Barna's, research backs Professor Bloom's observations. He found in a 1991 survey that among the American public, only 28 percent expressed a strong belief in absolute truth. But--get this--among professing evangelical, born-again Christians, only 23 percent accept this idea (*What Americans Believe*, cited by James Dobson in his December, 1991 newsletter)!

As a pastor, I see this cultural mind-set flooding into the church. It comes through in the common notion that doctrine is divisive and that we need to lay aside all our doctrinal differences and come together in Christian unity. A few months ago I received an invitation to attend a worship service at one of the Catholic churches in town where the former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches was to speak on, "Together on the Faith Journey." (The World Council is one of the most theologically liberal organizations in the world.)

I have received numerous invitations to attend unity services in which all of the churches of Flagstaff, Catholic and Protestant, come together to express our common faith in Christ. If I dare to bring up the fact that there are some serious, fundamental doctrinal differences between the Roman Catholic Church and those who hold to the teaching of the Protestant Reformers, I am labeled as divisive, unloving, and intolerant. The prevailing mood among American Christians is that doctrine doesn't really matter; all that matters is love, unity, and worship services which make us feel good.

Gordon Clark wrote, "Since God is truth, a contempt for truth is equally a contempt for God" (*A Christian Philosophy of Education*, p, 158). Jesus Christ claimed, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). The New Testament is clear that not everyone naming the name of Christ is truly Christian, because many false teachings

quickly moved in to lead people astray. After warning that the way to eternal life is narrow, whereas the way to destruction is broad, Jesus went on to warn, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). It takes a fair amount of discernment for a sheep to figure out that what looks like a sheep really isn't a sheep after all, but a wolf disguised as a sheep.

No where is this emphasis more pronounced than in the final three letters of the Apostle Paul. Often called the Pastoral Epistles, the letters of First Timothy, Titus, and Second Timothy (in that order) were written by Paul to two of his most trusted assistants, giving them his final instructions on how to shepherd God's flock. One of the dominant themes in these letters is the need for sound doctrine, based on God's Word of truth. A cursory reading of these letters shows that Paul's concern is set against the backdrop of many false teachers who were leading God's people astray. There are far more verses on this subject than I can cover (I invite you to study this theme for yourselves), but I want to develop briefly the following thesis based on these epistles:

Doctrinal truth is the foundation of the gospel  
and is the basis for Christian unity.

I can only touch on three points:

1. There is such a thing as absolute spiritual truth and therefore such a thing as damnable spiritual error.

Note 1 Timothy 1:3-11. Some men were teaching "strange doctrines" which did not further God's administration which is by faith. Also note the close connection (1:10-11) between sound teaching and the gospel. In 3:15 Paul states that the church is the pillar and support of the truth, which implies that truth is well-defined and absolute, not relative, and that it is an essential function of the true church to uphold God's truth. This is underscored in 4:1, where Paul warns that in later times some will fall away from the faith by paying attention to the doctrines of demons. The fact that demons are behind much false teaching implies that it can be so seriously wrong that it is damnable. In 4:16 Paul urges Timothy to pay close attention to himself and his teaching, "for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who

hear you." In 5:17 he shows that a main job for church leaders is to work hard at preaching and teaching. In 6:3 he warns again of those who advocate a different doctrine, not agreeing with sound words or with doctrine conforming to godliness.

Turning to Titus, notice that Paul begins with these inseparable ideas of truth and godliness (1:1). Further, in 1:9 he states that one of the main jobs for a pastor is to hold fast the faithful word in accordance with the teaching (doctrine), "that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." Clearly, it is not wrong and in fact is both right and necessary for a pastor both to contend for the truth and to speak out against error. I often hear that we ought to be positive. People will say to me, "Why can't you just be loving and positive? Why be critical of others? You're being judgmental!" But both Paul and Jesus did not just dispense positive pearls of wisdom. They both attacked false doctrine and false teachers, sometimes naming names (2 Tim. 2:17).

The fact is that some doctrine is true and leads to eternal life, whereas some doctrine is false and leads to eternal damnation. It is not enough just to be sincere. A few years ago, a number of people bought some bottles of Tylenol. They took the pills in all sincerity, thinking that it would help their headache, but it killed them because someone had laced those pills with cyanide. Sincerity wasn't the issue; the issue was truth. The fact is, everyone has a theology. But the crucial question is, Is your theology in line with sound doctrine that insures salvation, or is it corrupt theology that will lead you to destruction? You had better make sure, because the consequences are staggering! There is such a thing as absolute spiritual truth and error.

2. Spiritual truth is the foundation of the gospel and of spiritual growth.

We have already seen verses to this effect, and many more could be produced from the rest of the New Testament. In the Book of Galatians, for example, Paul contended vigorously against some false teachers called Judaizers. These men believed in Jesus Christ. They made claim of being born-again Christians. But they differed from Paul on one doctrinal matter: They said that in addition to faith in Jesus Christ, a person also had to keep the Jewish law, especially circumcision, in order to be saved. On account of

that one doctrinal difference, Paul said that they were preaching another gospel which is not a gospel, and that they were “anathema,” which means, eternally damned (Gal. 1:6-9)! Spiritual truth is the foundation of the gospel!

Hear me carefully: Biblical love does not keep silent when it comes to matters of life and death. If you love someone, you must speak the truth when they are in serious error. If someone you love is about to take medicine that you know will kill them, you do everything you can to stop them. Concerning these Judaizers who added good works to faith alone as being necessary for right standing with God, Paul didn't reason, “Well, these men believe in Christ, and unity and love are more important than right doctrine.” Rather, he said that these men were accursed because they were preaching a false gospel!

What I am about to say, I say because I love and care for every person here who is from a Catholic background. I want you to understand God's way of salvation so that you can walk out that door tonight knowing that you are right with God through faith in what Jesus Christ has done, and I want you to understand the difference between what Roman Catholicism teaches on this matter and what the Bible teaches.

At the Council of Trent (in 1547), the Roman Catholic Church responded to the Protestant Reformation, including the doctrine of justification by faith. The Canons and Decrees of Trent represent the official teaching of the Catholic Church to this day. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960's declared these doctrines “irreformable.” Trent did not deny that we are saved by God's grace through faith. But it added works to faith by combining justification (right standing with God) with sanctification (our growth in holiness subsequent to being justified) and by making justification a process that depends in part on our good works. To quote:

If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified, in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, ... let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 9, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [Baker], 2:112.)

If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 12, in Schaff, 2:113.)

If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 24, in Schaff, 2:115.)

If any one saith, that, after the grace of Justification has been received, to every penitent sinner the guilt is remitted, and the debt of eternal punishment is blotted out in such wise that there remains not any debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world, or in the next in Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened [to him]: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 30, in Schaff, 2:117.)

In other words, the Catholic Church declares that we are justified before God by grace through faith, but not through faith *alone*, but that our good works must be added to that faith in order both to preserve and increase our right standing before God. This process is not completed at the initial point of faith in Christ, and not even in this life, but only, hopefully, in Purgatory. Thus the Catholic Church denies the sufficiency of the guilty sinner's faith in Christ's sacrifice as the means of right standing with God.

I do not say any of this to be unkind to Roman Catholics. Quite the contrary, I say it because I care deeply that if any of you are Catholics, you come to a biblically correct understanding of this most crucial matter of how a person gets right with God. I say it because many of you have Catholic friends, and I want you to be able to help them see this clearly. And, I don't want us to compromise on the altar of so-called "love and unity" crucial biblical truth that divides Catholicism from Protestantism.

Not only is sound doctrine the foundation of the gospel, it is also essential for spiritual growth. I don't have time to develop this, but it is implicit in the word "sound," which means "health-producing." We get our word "hygienic" from this Greek word.

There is close connection in these epistles between sound doctrine (or truth) and godliness (Titus 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:5 in context; 1 Tim. 4:4-6). For this reason, Paul's final emotional and powerful appeal to Timothy is that he preach the Word, for the time will come when even those in the church will not endure sound doctrine, but will accumulate teachers in accordance with their own desires and will turn away their ears from the truth (2 Tim. 4:1-4). The fact that sound doctrine must be endured implies that it isn't always pleasant in that it confronts our sin and selfishness. But, like vegetables, it's good for you!

I contend that much of the flimsy Christianity of our day is due to the lack of sound doctrine in our pulpits. We must hold firmly to the fact that there is such a thing as absolute spiritual truth and that such truth is the foundation of the gospel and of spiritual growth. One final thought:

### 3. Sound doctrine is the basis for Christian unity.

There was no unity between Paul and the Judaizers because they were confused about an essential truth on the gospel. He warned Timothy to steer clear of men like Hymenaeus, Alexander, and Philetus, who had gone astray from the truth (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17; 4:14-15; Titus 3:10-11). Love that disregards essential doctrinal truth, especially about how a person is reconciled to God, is not biblical love, because it leads to the eternal ruin of others. Truth on essential doctrines is the basis for true Christian unity. To sacrifice sound doctrine in order to achieve unity is to make shipwreck of the Christian faith.

## Conclusion

A few years ago, at the beginning of a seminary course, the professor told the students that they would work together on one major project during that semester. They would move systematically through the New Testament to categorize every area of truth and determine how many times each area is addressed. Their goal was to find what one thing is emphasized more than any other in the New Testament. When they completed the project, they were amazed to see that warning against false doctrine is emphasized more than any other thing, even more than love, unity, and experience.

I urge you all not to be swept downstream with the cultural current of relativity. There is such a thing as absolute spiritual truth, and it matters greatly! It is essential for salvation and for growth as a Christian. And, while all Christians must be kind and gracious, even toward those in error, we must not be tolerant of serious doctrinal error. To compromise sound doctrine in favor of love and unity is not to love at all.