

The Priority of Sound Doctrine Over Speculative Teaching

1 Timothy 1:3 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, 4 nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith.

Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, 6 from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.

I once attended an air show, where we witnessed a mini-demonstration of how modern warfare is conducted. We were told that the first phase after reconnaissance is air superiority. Fighter jets battle it out to take control of the skies and remove enemy planes. Once you control the skies, you can send in bombers or gunships to do more damage from the air, and then move in your artillery to shell or bomb enemy positions. After that, the next phase is the ground assault, using tanks and armoured vehicles, and helicopter gunships. Finally, the soldiers are brought in through the air or otherwise, to finish the job on the ground. Because of the power and precision of modern weapons, if you don't follow that kind of procedure, you will risk total defeat. You cannot swap that order around, and carry troops before you've obtained control of the air, or risk losing them to enemy planes or bombs.

The hymn we sing says, “Like a mighty army, moves the church of God”. And as we fight a spiritual battle against spiritual forces of darkness, there is also a battle plan we are to follow, a kind of blueprint of how we advance. And just like modern warfare, we need to get first things first, prioritise the important, not get things out of order.

The pastoral epistles, are like mini war-manuals, because they show how the army of God is to be set up, and advance, what to do first, second, and third. First Timothy follows that kind of plan. Chapter 1 is focused on sound doctrine in the church. Chapter 2 deals with public prayer and worship in the church. Chapter 3 deals with the officers, the leadership of the church. Chapter 4 deals with false teaching in the church. Chapter 5 deals with various members and their needs in the church, and chapter 6 has a combination of remarks.

In this section of 1 Timothy, Paul will give Timothy the first and most crucial thing to do in the church he is pastoring. This first step is like the air superiority of the battle. Without this first thing taken care of, everything else will fail. Unless he begins here, he cannot move on to any of the other instructions, and it will come to nought. This first phase has to do with the doctrine of the church, for here is where true air superiority will be found.

This is crucial for us to know, because it teaches us one of the first things we should look for in a healthy church, and one of the first things we should look for in a faithful pastor. Here we'll find three actions Timothy must take to secure the skies as it were, for the advance of a healthy church.

I. Timothy Must Police the Doctrine

1 Timothy 1:3 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine,

Paul's first words in the letter likely link back to the last words he said to Timothy when they were saying goodbye at the harbour of Ephesus. Stay here, and help this church at Ephesus.

Before we look at the instruction about doctrine, we must not miss the first thing that Paul urged Timothy to do, in order to faithfully shepherd this church: *remain in Ephesus*. Remain, stay. Stay at

least as long as is necessary to get this church right.

Someone said a pastor's job can be summarised in four actions: preach and pray, love and stay. Stay. Put your roots down in one place long enough to make a difference. Stay at your post until God re-assigns you. Very little can be achieved by those pastors who spend very little time in one place. I remember John MacArthur's sermon on membership where he pointed out that the average pastor in America stays in one church for two years, which, as he said, is just enough time to accomplish nothing.

One pulpit committee was interviewing a man for the position of pastor of the church, and his resume or CV said he had thirty years of ministry experience. But upon closer inspection, they found he had pastored ten churches. One of the pulpit committee said to him, "You don't have thirty years of ministry experience. You have three years of ministry experience in ten churches."

You can barely accomplish anything in five, maybe a very dynamic man can do some real good in seven or eight. Of course, pastors legitimately move on because of all kinds of reasons: health issues, an ageing family member, a new phase of ministry, and sometimes a man may be in a place for a short period of time and still do some good. But men who keep jumping from church to church, re-preaching the same sermons they used at their last congregation will never reap the benefits of long-term ministry. Next year will be twenty years for me in this church, and there are now things I experience and see after that amount of time, that you cannot see if you keep trying to upgrade to what looks like a nicer or better or easier church. You cannot solidify doctrine in a few years. You cannot raise up sound leaders in two or three years, you cannot create a church culture in a few years.

Preach and pray, love and stay. And, if the tradition is correct, then Timothy remained in Ephesus for another thirty-four years. But with that settled, the very first thing that Paul exhorts Timothy is to police what is taught in his church. charge some that they teach no other doctrine,

Charge is a very strong word, which means to command. Timothy, as pastor, must take charge of the doctrine that is taught in his church. Timothy is not a mild-mannered moderator at a debate club, not the silently nodding chairman of a discussion group, not the philosophy professor inviting and encouraging any and every viewpoint. He certainly doesn't have absolute authority over people's lives, but this is the one area he must assert his authority in. He is charged to set things straight doctrinally, law down the law, and prevent people in his church from teaching what is wrong or false. You have authority, Timothy, use it.

Charge them to teach no other doctrine. What does that mean? The word in the original is the idea of teaching something contrary to the standard; that would be the apostolic doctrine which they had been given by Paul. This church already had the letter of Paul to them, and probably several of the other letters of Paul, they likely had at least one or two, if not three of the gospels, as well as all of the Old Testament. They had heard Paul teach them for more than two years while he lived there. Timothy knew apostolic doctrine inside-out, because he had been with Paul for over twelve years. There were already basic statements of faith, very early creeds which the church used as doctrinal boundaries. They knew the standard, and so did Timothy.

Paul says, police the doctrine, see to it that no one enters the pulpit, or even enters some kind of classroom or group and teaches something contrary to sound, biblical teaching.

In 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, there is an enormous emphasis on doctrine, teaching, instructions.

The word *doctrine* comes up 15 times, *word* 9 times, *teaching* 16 times, *truth* 14 times, *exhort* 8 times, as well as the words *correct*, *instruct*, *rebuke*, *preach*. Why all this emphasis on doctrine, teaching, instruction?

Answer: because the Bible is the source of our faith. From the Word emanates everything we say and think and do as the church. Christianity is not a religion based on our feelings, or our intuitions, or even our motives. Christianity is a faith that believes God has communicated, revealed Himself in word. First, the living Word, the Lord Jesus, and then the communication of that living Word into verbal Word – the Scriptures. Teaching the doctrines of the Scripture is the difference between true religion and false, the difference between God as He is, or some falsified version of Him. The life-giving Gospel depends on sound doctrine. Teaching which can genuinely change your life and transform the way you live, depends on sound doctrine.

If you want air superiority in the spiritual battle, then the F-35s you send in is sound doctrine, truth rooted in Scripture.

This is why one of the most important things a pastor can do is to first of all agree with a church's statement of faith, and then make sure that what is taught by anyone who teaches, agrees with that. One of the most important things you can do when you come to this church is to understand and examine the statement of faith, the doctrine that is the foundation upon which everything else is taught.

Timothy must police the doctrine. But Paul goes further. Timothy must not only make sure they are teaching no other doctrine except true doctrine, Timothy must do a second thing.

II. Timothy Must Prevent Speculative Teaching

nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith.

Not only must the doctrine be policed to line up with what is sound, but Timothy must not let his people or his teachers give heed to fables and endless genealogies. These are speculative teachings. *Speculative* means something based on mere speculation, conjecture, theory, unproven assumptions or mere possibilities. That's what these were. Fables and endless genealogies likely represents the strong Jewish influence in Ephesus, where some of the early rabbinic midrashim were making their way into the church. These were stories and fictional tales added to biblical truths, legends and speculative ideas that captured the imagination, but were sub-biblical.

One example was a book written about 200 BC called the Book of Jubilees. This is a book that covers the same ground as the book of Genesis, but with all sorts of speculation about Nephilim and Watchers and classes of angels. Similar to it is the book of Enoch, filled with similar stuff. They are fictional tales. Nothing wrong with biblical genealogies, but what these teachers did was draw on all the speculative, fictional material that was written around and on top of genealogies and books with genealogies in them, like Genesis.

Now as you can tell, this is not the same kind of heresy that was in Galatia, where people are denying the gospel. It doesn't seem like there is anyone in the Ephesian church who is distorting fundamental doctrine. But there seems to be a slide towards this kind of fantastical, imaginative kind of teaching that begins to divert people away from sound doctrine. Some of it is superstition, weird tales, folk theology, and some of it is sheer fantasy. Paul tells both Timothy and Titus in many places not to allow the pulpit to become a platform for the weird, the petty, the bizarre, the

phantasmagoric.

1 Timothy 4:7 But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness.
2 Timothy 2:16 But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.
2 Timothy 2:23 But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.
2 Timothy 4:3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

The reason Paul emphasises this so much is because it is a temptation both of the preacher and of the people to veer away from sound doctrine into strange doctrine, from meaty doctrine into mysterious doctrine. Speculative stuff is attractive to people for all the wrong reasons: it seems to be new, novel, unheard-of, fresh. It seems to be alternative, lesser-known, maybe even suppressed, hidden, unusual, elite knowledge. It is imaginative, fantastical, exciting. For that reason, it grabs people for all the reasons bad movies do: gripping, audacious, explosive, theatrical.

For them it was Jewish fables, and mythical tales. For us, it is similar and different. Modern pulpits and Christian bookstores and online podcasts are filled with extraordinary tales of spiritual warfare, wrestling with demons, visions of spiritual warfare, accounts of exorcisms and angels with swords. Fantastical tales of miracles and visions and dreams and prophecies, and special words from the Lord. There's a revival of interest in these Jewish fables: fascination with the book of Enoch, and similar books.

On top of that, we now have an avalanche of Internet conspiracy theory and alternative truth to keep our jaws chewing: UFOs and Nephilim, Illuminati and Qanon, 9/11 and Moon-hoaxes, secret weapons and secret technologies, the Flat Earth, the Hollow Earth, to say nothing of pro- and anti-vax.

And if that weren't enough, we have the internet discernment ministries whose bread and butter is suspicion, and slander, who specialise in disputes over words, who focus on foolish and ignorant disputes. And then we have those turning legitimate end-time prophecy into newspaper sensationalism, and peddling their speculations as sound doctrine. And this isn't something new. Listen to Charles Spurgeon, writing in the 19th century about preachers in his day who did this:

“Your guess at the number of the beast, your Napoleonic speculations, your conjectures concerning a personal Antichrist--forgive me, I count them but mere bones for dogs; while men are dying, and hell is filling, it seems to me the veriest drivel to be muttering about an Armageddon at Sebastopol or Sadowa or Sedan, and peeping between the folded leaves of destiny to discover the fate of Germany.” In another place, he spoke about a preacher who did this kind of thing:

“He is great upon the ten toes of the beast, the four faces of the cherubim, the mystical meaning of badgers' skins, and the typical bearings of the staves of the ark, and the windows of Solomon's temple: but the sins of business men, the temptations of the times, and the needs of the age, he scarcely ever touches upon. Such preaching reminds me of a lion engaged in mouse-hunting.”

Speculative, fantastical, hypothetical preaching about the mystical, the future, the hidden, and the secret will always tickle and tingle. But it will not feed, and the result is given at the end of verse 4: which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith.

Teaching that specialises in the arcane, the mysterious, the esoteric, the obscure, the enigmatic, or even the most abstruse and fine points of debatable doctrine leads to disputes, arguments, controversy. Of course, it will draw a crowd. But the crowd will sooner or later begin to quarrel among themselves. But because it is built on the speculative, it can offer nothing firm or concrete or

certain, and so it opens up endless debates.

People who live on this stuff are, not surprisingly, almost always debating with people. Churches that build their ministries on this stuff are either having endless internal conflicts, or having endless conflicts with other churches, and other ministries. The fruit of speculative teaching is disputes, arguments, conflict. Ask yourself if the teachers, groups and churches that specialise in speculative stuff: are they known for peace, a lack of conflict, and harmony with others?

This kind of thing produces conflicts instead of godly edification which is in faith.

What should be happening is a building up of the church, a growth in the members, growth in their characters, in their marriages, parenting, their work lives, their speech, thoughts, actions. They should be developing in the Word and in the faith that receives, understands and obeys the Word. But instead of growth, there is stagnation, and contention. A pastor must decide, does he want a healthy family, or does he want a cage fight with spectators? Does he want meat and potatoes on the table, or jelly-bean, gummy-bear pudding topped with sour-worms and pop-rocks?

Paul says to Timothy, and by application to every pastor, and to every Christian who holds his or her pastor accountable: don't let the pulpit become a sideshow. Your people need to grow, not be entertained; they need to be edified, not amused. Don't follow the pied-piper of speculation, stick to the immovable north-star of sound doctrine.

Now Paul moves from the negative to the positive. Timothy must know what to avoid, but what is he aiming for? Paul gives him the grand purpose of ministry and sound doctrine and church life in verse 5.

III. Timothy Must Prioritise the Purpose of Ministry

1 Timothy 1:5 Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,

Very simply, Timothy, the purpose of your pastoral authority is love. Sound doctrine, biblical teaching, wholesome theology always leads to love. The object of the love isn't stated, but it easy to infer it: love for God, which is the first and greatest commandment. Love for our neighbour, which is the second greatest commandment. Love for one another, which is the new commandment. To love God and neighbour is the fulfillment of the law according to Romans 13:8 and Galatians 5:14.

If a pastor insists upon and ensures that sound doctrine is taught and lived out, then the result will be that greatest of virtues: love. Greater than faith and hope, the first of the fruit of the Spirit, always the chief in the lists of virtue, love. Love is the height of Christian maturity.

Love is not the what the world thinks it is. The world combines the ideas of lust, infatuation, and a smug feeling of benevolence and tolerance. Whatever that is, it isn't love. Instead, Paul tells us that real love comes out of three sources: a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,

These are very similar, overlapping ideas. A pure heart is a mind and will acting from cleansed motives. A good conscience is a conscience without a sense of inner accusation or blame. A sincere faith refers to belief without any kind of play-acting, no pretence or show.

Take those three ideas and compare them to the way the world loves. The world loves out of impure motives, with a view to using people. The world's conscience is accusing it, knowing it has lied and cheated and backstabbed to people it claims to love. And the world loves with plenty of hypocrisy

and two-facedness, all smiles on the outside with hatred on the inside.

Now if you are being exposed to sound doctrine, you are being washed from that kind of love, and learning as a disciple of Jesus to love unselfishly, candidly and sincerely, honestly, truthfully. Love is crystal clear water, unmuddied with selfishness, hypocrisy.

What is love? Love is the God-given, Spirit-enabled, earnest and honest delight in what is good for someone else. When that Someone is God, you delight in and desire His glory. When that someone else is your neighbour, you delight in and desire his or her Christlikeness.

A growing church is growing in love. Take all the things a church is supposed to do, and you will find love is at the heart of it. Love is at the heart of evangelism, at the heart of missions, at the heart of true service of each other, at the heart of mercy to the world, at the heart of warm fellowship in the church, and at the heart of worship. It is all at once the simplest thing and the most complex, both the easiest thing to do and the most difficult. Sound doctrine leads to love, and by the way, love will lead to more sound doctrine.

So what happens if I or another teacher in this church deviate from growing in love and keeping the main thing the main thing? Verse 6 and 7 show us the danger of deviating from the truth.

1 Timothy 1:6 from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.

Some people, some teachers, might have known or begun with the sound doctrine that produces love for God and man. But they have strayed from it. They began deviating, leaving the standard of sound doctrine. They grew tired of teaching the old, old story of the gospel. They grew tired of teaching the same doctrines. They wanted to ride their bicycle on the very edge of the road where their parents told them it's dangerous; they wanted to play right by the fence where the teacher told them not to go.

The longer you dabble in the weird, the unorthodox, the heretical, the weird, the more you acclimatise to it. A minor course correction in a ship travelling 1000 kilometres is a major change after 1000 kilometres. The result is eventually not just a straying, but a full blown change in direction, turning aside.

What do they turn aside to? *Idle talk*, a word used only here in the New Testament. It means, empty, fruitless talk, idle, vain, meaningless discussion. Their sermons and lessons are now, secretly, a joke in Hell. Satan laughs when they speak, because their discourses no longer make a dent on his kingdom. They have become meaningless chatter, flat and tasteless lectures for those that prefer their sermons without conviction, without life-changing power, without the demand for change and obedience. Mere intellectual table-tennis, mental air-hockey for those who like to play mind games with truth.

How do you get there? Paul says these people desired to become teachers of the Law. That is, in that culture, they wanted the prestige of being rabbinical: great and learned scribes who could explain Torah, as well as all the commentaries, the midrashim on the Torah. They wanted to be unusual, different, cutting-edge. They wanted to set themselves apart from the crowd of pastors and teachers teaching the same old sound doctrine.

All teaching runs the risk of pride. It's simply one of the hazards of the job. To teach is to assume a role of authority or knowledge. For that very reason Paul says that a pastor should not be a new

convert: ...lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. (1 Timothy 3:6). If pride gets hold of a teacher, the desire to look and seem expert will become the tail that wags the dog, and soon he is straying, so as to keep his listeners intrigued and dependent. Soon is he deviating to seem novel, and unusual, and profound, and mysterious.

But here is the sad result of falling in love with your own voice. understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.

When you get to this place, you have lost touch with truth. You have handled the currency of truth so much and so roughly that your fingers are now calloused, and you can no longer feel. Words and ideas have become cliches, ideas have become playthings, concepts have become toys to kick around or swing around. You don't really understand the meaning, or the implication, or the reasoning behind what you teach, and confidently affirm. You have become an echo chamber for other people's ideas, but you have lost touch with the urgency and the power and the glory of truth. You have become a clanging gong, a purveyor of trite phrases and religious cliches, a fluent mimic of the foreign language of religionese.

In the effort to become great, you become negligible, in trying to appear learned, you are reduced to sounding foolish, you wanted men's praise, you shall end up only with their pity and their scorn.

Truth is not a thing to be trifled with. Men's souls depend on it. There is great danger in drawing near to truth, becoming over-familiar with it, and then swerving from it. It is a sharp instrument that can save lives, but it can also wound and scar the careless teacher of truth. James 3:1 warns us, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment."

In the battle for souls, the church of God must put first things first. First, straighten out the doctrine, and don't let it be sidetracked with the curious. When that kind of air supremacy is obtained the result will be the clear and pure conquering force of love, love for God, love for neighbour, love for each other.