



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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Where Has Our Discernment Gone? (3)

Ephesians 4:14

IN OUR LAST TWO ISSUES, WE HAVE EXAMINED THE text of Ephesians 4:14 and it's vital application to a day when discernment is all but dead in Christianity. Once again our text declares: "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive."

Having examined the characteristics of spiritual children, the sources of false doctrine, and some tests for discernment, we offer one more principle and a conclusion.

The Challenge to Discernment

All the examples we offered last month, and a myriad of others, demonstrate how completely undiscerning the Church has become. Now we could understand this if the Bible only mentioned discernment once or twice, but the fact is that *the discerning of Truth from error is a recurring theme throughout Scripture.*

When God asked Solomon what he wanted most, Solomon answered, "Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?" (I Kings 3:9). We, too, have access to such discernment. As we'll come back to in a moment, Hebrews 4:12 declares that God's Word is the "discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." As is the pastor's responsibility today, one of the chief duties of the priests was to "teach [God's] people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean" (Ezek. 44:23).

Most people are aware of the old adage, "Red sky in morning, sailors take warning; red sky at night, sailor's delight," which is based upon Matthew 16:2-3. The occasion was when the Pharisees tempted Jesus to perform a sign from heaven. But He turned it around on them and said, "O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?" In other words, they could discern a simple natural phenomenon, but they had no spiritual discernment of Who Jesus really was. The Greek for "discern" is *diakrinō*, one of several similar words that speak of judgment and discernment. It literally means "to make a distinction," something the Pharisees *could not* do and something many Christians today *will not* do.

A graphic picture of discernment appears in Acts 17:11. After leaving Thessalonica because of much bitter treatment from Jews there, Paul and Silas headed for Berea, about forty-five miles away. Upon entering the synagogue, they found a group of new believers who "were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." While many in Thessalonica had "received the word of God which [they] heard" (I Thes. 2:13), the Bereans were totally dedicated to the study of Scripture to see if what Paul said was true. *That* is discernment.

Paul also declared to the Corinthians, who were anything but mature, discerning, or spiritual, "He that is spiritual judgeth all things" (I Cor. 2:15). "Spiritual" is *pneumatikos*, which means "non-carnal"¹ or "dominated by the Spirit, in contrast to [the] natural."² To really be

spiritual, then, means that we are characterized not by our natural instincts or opinions but by the Holy Spirit.

That is why Paul further says that the spiritual person “judgeth all things.” Here is a crucial principle. “Judgeth” is the same word translated “discerned” in the previous verse: “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” The Greek for “discerned” here is *anakrino*. From about 400 B.C onwards, it expressed “the questioning process which leads to a judgement: to examine, cross-examine, interrogate, enquire, and investigate.” Other concepts in the word are “scrutinize” and “sift.”³ To discern something means that we don’t say, “Well, as long as that Bible teacher talks about God or Jesus, then he’s okay.” True spirituality and maturity means that we examine *everything*, that we investigate, question, scrutinize, and sift through every aspect of what is being taught and practiced, not from the perspective of the flesh, natural inclination, or personal opinion, but by the domination of the Holy Spirit and God’s Word. Most people are, just like the Corinthians, anything but *spiritual*; they are, in fact, the very opposite, looking at everything from their perspective not God’s. The truly spiritual person does not accept everything that comes along; rather he or she first examines it Biblically to see if it’s right or wrong.

Paul likewise wrote the Thessalonians, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil” (I Thes. 5:21-22). “Prove” is *dokimazō*, which means “test, pronounce good, establish by trial.” A related word, *dokimos*, was originally used as a technical term for coins that were genuine.⁴ So Paul is saying, “Examine everything, put everything to the test, verify each item to see if it is genuine or if it’s a fake.” If it’s good, seize it and hold on to it. If not, however, we are to withdraw from it. As the master expositor John Gill wrote 100 years before Spurgeon in London:

Abstain from all appearance of evil, of doctrinal evil. Not only open error and heresy are to be avoided, but what has any show of it, or looks like it, or carries in it a suspicion of it, or may be an occasion thereof, or lead unto it; wherefore all new words and phrases of this kind should be shunned, and the form of sound words held fast.

The Apostle John echoes Paul’s mandate to discernment by also using *dokimazō*: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but *try* the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (I Jn. 4:1, emphasis added). How much clearer could Scripture be? *Don’t believe every spirit*. There are several teachers today we could list who can say anything and people will believe it. They are never questioned, never doubted. Likewise, there are countless

claims to spiritual authority today, innumerable assertions that “this is what the Bible says,” but every single one of these is to be examined, tested, and verified.

As I shared this with the sheep under my care, I told them that their pastor must also be tested and verified. That is why all pastors should stick with the Scripture alone, expositing only that. We should not want anything new or novel, no new terms or new philosophies. We should want only what *the text says*. If we stick with Scripture alone, that leaves little room for error.

Finally, Hebrews 4:12 is among the strongest New Testament statements about discernment: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” The Greek for “discerner” is *kritikos*, which appears only here in the New Testament and which from Plato’s day onward referred to “a competent, experienced judge.”⁵ What a perfect description of the Word of God!—The Discerner, The Judge of men’s thoughts and even their “intents” (Greek, *ennoia*), that is, intentions, ideas, notions, and purposes.

Before we go on, we should also address one other verse that always arises with this issue, Matthew 7:1: “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” This is used by most people to say, “See there, Jesus says we are not supposed to be critical of anyone; we should not criticize what they believe or say.” That is always the cry of tolerance: “Just leave me alone; don’t judge what I say; don’t ask any questions; just let things be.”

But is that what the verse says? Of course not. If it did, Paul contradicted the Lord Jesus many times. What such people fail to do is *read the context* (vs. 2-5):

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.

What Jesus is very clearly saying is that we are not to judge and discern *hypocritically* or judge someone’s *motives and attitudes*, which have nothing to do with what someone *teaches*. They might have the purest motive and sweetest attitude, but that is not the issue; *the issue is what they teach*. Each of us is tempted to hold others to a higher standard than we hold ourselves, which is hypocrisy, so we must first make sure of our own life, make sure our standard is consistent, and *then* discern actions. In fact, that is exactly what Jesus says: “First,

get the *log* out of your own eye and *then* you can remove the *splinter* that's in your brother's eye." Our Lord did not say, "Leave the splinter where it is." He said, "Deal with the error in your life first and then address the error in your brother."

Paul's command to Timothy to "preach the Word" in II Timothy 4:2-4 also includes the result of *not* doing so. When people *willingly* "turn away their ears from the truth," they *unwillingly* are "turned unto fables." Most significant is that while "shall turn away" is in the Active Voice (subject doing the action), that is, they willfully choose to do this, the words "shall be turned unto fables" is in the Passive Voice (subject being acted upon), which means that they don't choose this result; they are being acted upon and have no choice. Because they willfully turned away, they now will unwillingly be deceived by "fables." This is a staggering truth! The Greek is *muthos*, where we get the English words "myth" and "mythology" and is always used in the New Testament to denote a cunning fable full of falsehoods and pretenses for the purpose of deceiving others.⁶

That is why we have mentioned so many errors in our series. Because so many people have *willingly* turned away from the Truth, they have in turn *unwillingly* been deceived into countless false teachings, and there's virtually no discernment left in the Church. Besides what we've already listed, doctrinal error is everywhere: God's sovereignty has been redefined in the "Open Theism" movement, Christians seek extra-biblical revelation through mysticism and so-called prophecies, hell is denied as a reality, the roles of men and women are blurred or destroyed altogether, homosexuality, fornication, abortion, and other immorality is condoned and even defended, and on it goes.

I doubt that anyone in our day has said it better than has John MacArthur: "A half truth presented as if it were a whole truth is an untruth." To apply that, think of a courtroom setting. A witness swears to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." If that witness does not tell the whole Truth, if he leaves something out, or if he omits something to try to hide what really happened, he is, therefore, lying. To withhold the Truth is a lie. Likewise, if men today are not preaching all of God's Truth, that is, "all the counsel of God," they are committing a sin of omission and, therefore, are in the final analysis preaching a lie.

Paul warned of the subtle danger of satanic lies, describing their sources as

false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works (II Cor. 11:13-15).

The word "transforming" is an interesting one. Please follow this carefully. The Greek is *metaschematizō*, to change the outward form or appearance of something. It's actually best understood by contrasting it with *metamorphoō* (English "metamorphosis"), which we find in Romans 12:2 ("transformed by the renewing of our minds"). One Greek scholar puts it this way:

If one were to change a Japanese garden into an Italian one, this would be *metaschematizō*. But if someone were to transform a garden into something wholly different, as a baseball field, it is *metamorphoō*. It is possible for Satan to *metaschematizō*, transform himself into an angel of light . . . that is, change his whole outward [appearance]. But it would be impossible to apply *metamorphoō* to any such change, for this would imply an internal change, which lies beyond his power.⁷

In other words, while Satan can't change his *nature*, he can change his *appearance*. He appears as something different than he really is.

I was immediately reminded here of how the word "virtual" is used in computer technology, such as "Virtual Reality," which is technology that enables us to be "near reality." We can totally design a house, for example, with so much detail and realism that we can "walk around inside it" and take a "virtual tour." That is exactly what Satan does—he creates *virtual light*. It's so near the real light that the majority of people think it's real. *It therefore takes careful discernment by Christians to see that virtual light is really darkness.* The prophet Isaiah's first test of any teacher was, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Is. 8:20). If men do not preach the Scripture alone, there is no light in them, and *we should not even listen to them.*

Besides all those, Scripture over, and over, and over again emphasizes discernment and the dangers of false doctrine. Let us quote just a few:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits . . . (Matt. 7:15-16).

Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not (Matt. 24:23-26)

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made

you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. (Acts 20:28-31).

But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ . . . For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light (II Cor. 11:3, 13-14).

O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: Which some professing have erred concerning the faith (I Tim. 6:20-21).

Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision [*katatomē*, a mutilation, a butchering] (Phil. 3:2).

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ (Col. 2:8).

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of (II Pet. 2:1-2).

Conclusion

Never before has the Church been in such need of discernment and pure **doctrine** as it is today. One of the best statements on the place of doctrine in the Church was written back in 1983 by pastor and theologian Gordon Clark. Commenting on I Timothy 6:1—“Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed”—he writes:

What the speed-reader is apt to miss in this verse is the repetition of the importance of doctrine. Doctrine and the name of God, that is, God Himself and His truth, must not be blasphemed. Today liberals, humanists, behaviorists, and the neo-orthodox attack doctrine; but what is worse, those who think of themselves as devout evangelicals strongly insisting on the inerrancy of Scripture, ignore doctrine. They favor pastoral counseling, they prate about four spiritual laws, sing Gospel dance tunes, testify to their happiness, even read some of the Bible, but they read it without trying to understand it. Nor is the major blame to be put on the congregation; most of whom know no Greek; the major blame lies on ministers who know no Greek and not much theology. They do not speak evil of God’s work: they simply do not speak. A friend of mine, who did his best to preach the whole counsel of God, had a conversation with a very popular preacher and author. Said the popular idol to my friend, “I believe the same doctrines you do.” Said my friend, “I am delighted, I wouldn’t have known it, if you hadn’t told me.”⁸

Indeed, in many circles today, doctrine is avoided at all costs. *What folly!* Doctrine is the foundation on which we stand, and we must discern it carefully. If we fail in this, we “reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:7).

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

In The Next Issue: “*Does the Authorship of Hebrews Matter?*” (II Peter 3:15-16)

¹ Strong’s Concordance.

² Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary, NT*, p. 1185.

³ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, Vol. 2, p. 362.

⁴ Brown, Vol. 3, p. 808.

⁵ Brown, Vol. 2, p. 362.

⁶ Zodhiates, p. 999.

⁷ Zodhiates, p. 973.

⁸ Gordon Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1983), pp. 106-107.

Truth is the most orient pearl in Christ’s crown. Let us contend for the truth, as one would a large sum of money, that it should not be wrested out of his hand.

Puritan Thomas Watson – *A Body of Divinity*, p. 208

Q and A

with Pastor Watson

Q: What [does] the Bible say regarding churches “associating” with one another, as I’ve [recently] returned to the land of [a particular evangelical denomination] (along with others, various smaller “associations” within the state convention, within a larger convention, etc.)? As a tandem to that thought, [what about] the issue of churches of various beliefs associating with each other through a “ministerial alliance” type of thing?

MB in Arkansas

A: In light of our series, that is, indeed, a profound question, and thanks for asking it.

I’ll address the second question first. I’ve never been a part of a Ministerial Association simply because of who I’d be associating with. Such associations include men (and women nowadays) from liberal denominations who aren’t even Believers, as well as even apostates and cult members. While I certainly do not wish to offend, it’s simply impossible to “fellowship” with people who are not true Christians. What are we going to talk about? Social reform? The community calendar? The weather? *By definition*, such groups are built upon the foundation of setting all doctrine aside for the sake of “unity.” Several years ago our local newspaper gave free space to *all* the churches in town in which the ministers would rotate in writing a weekly column. After writing a

couple, however, I was compelled to withdraw because of the content of most of the others. I did not want God’s Truth to be lumped in with everyone else’s “opinion.”

Second, as for “churches ‘associating’ with one another,” I taught on this at great length in an exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16, where we see: the *grace* of unity (1-2), the *ground* of unity (4-6), the *gifts* for unity (7-11), and the *growth* of unity (12-16). (This complete exposition is on our website.)

Verses 4-6, therefore, list the foundational doctrines of The Faith, the seven spiritual realities that unite all true Believers. Contained in those seven principles is the very essence of Christianity, its basic truths. Our unity and fellowship must be based on those. If someone accepts them, there can be unity, even when there is disagreement on minor points of doctrine or practice. But if one or more of those is rejected, there can be no unity and fellowship. Biblical unity can be defined as: *the unanimous agreement concerning the unique revelation of God through and in Jesus Christ*. And those seven spiritual realities are rooted in Christ and His Word.

As for “denominations” themselves, while they are tragically a necessity to mark distinctions between the many groups that exist and to keep doctrine pure, they have their own set of problems. Perhaps that’s a subject for a future article.

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A Ministry of
Grace Bible Church
P.O. Box 235
Meeker, CO 81641
www.TheScriptureAlone.com
docwatson@nctelecom.net

This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God’s people to carefully examine and discern Truth. Periodically, we will also include book reviews of popular books, for much that is published today demands discerning reading. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our “Q & A” section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed.

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