



Truth

On Tough Texts

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The Old Paths

Jeremiah 6:16

THUS SAITH THE LORD, STAND YE IN THE ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein.¹

On occasion, we address a text that while not a “tough text” exegetically or interpretively, it is a hard, or at least challenging, text to face. Jeremiah 6:16 is one of those, and is one that is desperately needed in our day. I once heard a comedian quip to his audience, “Have you noticed that everybody nowadays talks about ‘new and improved’? I guess that means what we already have is old and lousy.” As we’ll see, that is, indeed, characteristic of today’s church.

About 60 years after the great prophet Isaiah’s death, God called another man to the terribly difficult task of proclaiming God’s Word to his own perverted generation on the eve of their national disaster. It was 626 BC, and that man was 20-year-old Jeremiah. His name is a transliteration of the Hebrew *yirmeyāh* and seems to mean “Jah will rise.” Jeremiah’s contemporaries included: Ezekiel, who preached in Babylon; Daniel, who stayed faithful in Nebuchadnezzar’s own palace; Habakkuk and Zephaniah, who aided Jeremiah in Jerusalem; Nahum, who predicted the fall of Nineveh; and Obadiah, who proclaimed the ruin of Edom. Someone has said of Jeremiah: “Amid all the bright stars of Old Testament history, there is not a name that shines brighter than that of Jeremiah”.² I agree and return to Jeremiah often for encouragement in the responsibilities, rigors, and even rejections that come with biblical ministry and the proclamation of Truth.

God called Jeremiah to minister during the darkest days of Judah’s history. Following in the footsteps of Israel (the

Northern Kingdom), the spiritual condition of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) was horrific. There was flagrant idol worship (cf. chap. 2), including the sacrificing of children to the god Molech in the Valley of Hinnom just outside Jerusalem. King Ahaz had set up much of this in Isaiah’s day. The godly Hezekiah had led in reforms and clean-up (Isa. 36:7), but his son Manasseh, the most wicked king in Judah’s history, continued to promote these practices into Jeremiah’s time (Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35). Many also worshiped the “queen of heaven” (7:18; 44:19), a title for Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and fertility, whose worship involved abominable obscenities (44:17–19, 25). While King Josiah sincerely tried to bring reform, sin was too deeply imbedded in the people’s hearts. As 3:10 recounts, “Judah hath not turned unto me with her whole heart, but feignedly, saith the LORD.” He led the nation in a shallow *revival* but not in a heart-changing *repentance*. The idols were *removed*, the temple *repaired*, and the worship of Jehovah *restored*, but the people had not *repented*, had not turned to the Lord with their whole heart and soul. The same is true today of much so-called “revival,” which often is emotionally driven and temporary at best. Another striking characteristic appears in 5:31: “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so.” Like today, people loved what was preached even though it was not true! People simply do not want to hear the Truth (2 Tim. 4:1–4).

The setting of our text, then, is Jeremiah’s vivid description of Jerusalem’s impending destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, which would, in fact, come in Jeremiah’s own lifetime. He repeatedly warns that repentance is the only hope for escaping ruin.

That brings us to our text. The picture here is a traveler who is not sure of the way to his destination. He comes to an intersection of several paths but does not know which one he should take. He asks another traveler for directions, who points him in the right direction and tells him which path is the right one. There are two key words here.

First, there is the word **way** (or **ways**). This is the Hebrew *derek*, which in the literal sense speaks of a “road” or “trodden path.” Metaphorically, then, it refers to a marked-out pattern of life, as in Proverbs 3:6: “In all thy [patterns of life] acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” Deuteronomy 8:6 likewise commands, “Thou shalt keep the commandments of the LORD thy God, to walk in his [patterns of life], and to fear him.” We find other verses that speak of either righteous, pleasant, or wise patterns of life (2 Sam. 22:22; Prov. 3:17; 6:6), but also patterns that are evil and dark (1 Kings 22:52; Prov. 2:13).

Second, there is the word **paths**. This is *naṭiyb*, which is similar to *derek* in meaning and at times modifies it, as it does here and in Proverbs 12:18: “In the way of righteousness is life; and in the *pathway* [combination of both words] thereof there is no death.” An extremely significant verse is Psalms 119:35: “Make me to go in the *path* of thy commandments; for therein do I delight.”

So Jeremiah was pleading with the people to follow **the old** trodden and true **paths**. The word **old** is *’ôlām*. While this word is used more than 300 times to indicate indefinite continuation into the distant future, there are at least 20 instances where it refers to the past. Joshua 24:2, for example, looks back to “the flood in old time,” indicating previous generations. Here, then, it looks back even farther in the sense of generations, as it also does later in Jeremiah 18:15: “Because my people hath forgotten me, they have burned incense to vanity, and they have caused them to stumble in their ways [*derek*] from the ancient [*’ôlām*] paths, to walk in paths [*naṭiyb*], in a way not cast up.”

Jeremiah also begged the people to follow **the good way**. The word **good** is *ṭôb*, which has a huge range of meanings: “good, pleasant, beneficial, precious, delightful, right, well-pleasing, fruitful, morally correct, proper, convenient.” The Creation narrative of Genesis 1 best expresses all these aspects of meaning when God declares each facet of His handiwork to be **good**. Likewise, Jeremiah called the people to this kind of behavior.

What, then, are the **old paths**? It is obvious that the “new (or modern) paths” the people were taking were that of apostasy and idolatry. We would submit, therefore, that the **old paths**, both then and now, consist of two basic principles: *doctrine* and *duty*.

I. The Old Path of Doctrine

Today’s popular “new paths” are clearly and proudly marked with what amounts to flashing neon road signs: entertainment, pragmatism, relativism, tolerance, user-friendliness, seeker-sensitivity, self-fulfillment, personal

prosperity, motivational speeches, pop-music, social relevancy, and others. We want the “new and improved.” Do you remember the some 7,000 wonderfully quaint Burma-Shave road signs that existed from 1925–1963? They were replaced by huge, unsightly billboards because people were now moving too fast to see the old signs. Likewise, the profound truths of Christianity are being replaced by the monstrosities we have just listed.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in his *Journal* on September 2, 1851: “The more we know about the ancients, the more we find that they were like the moderns.”³ Likewise, I have no doubt that today’s “new paths” had their 626 BC equivalents when God called Jeremiah. The people in that day no more wanted doctrine and absolute Truth than do most people in our day, and so replaced it with things they thought were better. Worse, both then and now, is that leadership carries much of the blame. As 5:31 again indicates, and as has been observed often by many, responsibility, accountability, liability, and other characteristics lie squarely on the shoulders of leadership.

Is it not odd that some in the secular world seem to know more about true leadership than do so-called “Christian leaders”? We have many in church leadership today, for example, who proudly say they are “managers,” but as writer and management consultant Peter Drucker (1909–2005) well puts it: “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” Where are the men of God who are driven by what is biblically right instead of what is popular? Similarly, Warren Bennis (1925–), organizational consultant, author, and widely regarded pioneer of the field of leadership studies, writes: “The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.” Likewise, where are the men of God today who are challenging what is fashionable and proclaiming the Truth? I was also struck by this statement by noted Harvard professor and author Robert Coles (1929–):

Abraham Lincoln did not go to Gettysburg having commissioned a poll to find out what would sell in Gettysburg. There were no people with percentages for him, cautioning him about this group or that group or what they found in exit polls a year earlier. When will we have the courage of Lincoln?

Indeed, where are the true leaders in today’s church? Where are men who instead of taking polls and organizing focus groups to see what people want in a church, proclaim Truth no matter what the reaction of people might be? Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952) put it well when he wrote:

It is *natural* that the preacher should wish to please his hearers, but it is *spiritual* for him to desire and aim at the approbation of God. Nor can any man serve two masters. As the apostle expressly declared, “For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10): solemn words are those! How they condemn them whose chief aim is to preach to

crowded churches. Yet what grace it requires to swim against the tide of public opinion, and preach that which is unacceptable to the natural man.⁴

We would, therefore, submit, that there is nothing as foolish and destructive as the de-emphasis, downplaying, and disregard of doctrine and theology. I must admit that words truly fail to adequately express this principle. Without doctrine, there is no direction, no compass, no foundation, no core. Everything is shallow, surface, superficial, and even spiritually suicidal.

Many years ago I heard Vance Havner make this statement, and I have never forgotten it: “Evangelism is to Christianity what veins are to our bodies. You can cut Christianity anywhere and it will bleed evangelism. Evangelism is vascular; it’s our business.” I agree with that totally, but I would like to build on the analogy: *Doctrine is to Christianity what bone marrow is to the physical body.* Bone marrow produces blood cells: *red* cells carry oxygen and have a lifetime of 120 days; *white* cells are part of the immune system and have a lifetime of a few days to years; and *platelets* are involved in blood coagulation and have a lifetime of about nine days. All that is what doctrine does. Some “cells” sustain and enrich our lives, others keep us healthy from things that would harm us, and still others heal us when we are injured. Further, as cells have limited life spans, the “marrow of doctrine” continues the work of replacing the exhausted cells with fresh ones. While some today insist that “doctrine is not practical,” such an idea is ludicrous, as we will see in more detail.

Another statement, this one by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, is also one that often comes to mind: “The most foolish of all Christians are those who dislike and decry the importance of Theology and teaching. Does not that explain why they fail in practice?”⁵ Why are many Christians weak and shallow? Why do many fall to any new trend that comes along? Why do many fail to discern false teaching? Why do many fail to be consistent, faithful, and obedient? Why do many succumb to temptation? Why do many collapse when someone challenges their faith? *Because they do not know doctrine.* Sadly, they are not being taught doctrine by their pastors; they are not being taught that God’s Word *alone* is Truth. They are being taught that Truth is relative and can be found in many other places. *That* is why they fail, and that is why Christianity continues to degenerate. The more modern *trends* that arise, the more biblical *truths* that are sacrificed on the Altar of Change. As Charles Spurgeon so well said: “The Holy Ghost rides in the chariot of Scripture, and not in the wagon of modern thought.”⁶ Far too many Christian leaders today are sitting in wagons instead of standing in chariots.

Contrary to popular thinking, doctrine and teaching are repeatedly, over and over again, emphasized in Scripture. The word *doctrine*, in fact, appears 45 times in the New Testament, 11 of which are in reference to Jesus’ own ministry. Regarding Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we read:

“And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine, For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt. 7:28, 29). We also read in Mark 4:2: “He taught them many things by parables, and . . . doctrine.” Parables, we should remember, were not for the shallow hearer. Matthew 13:10–17 makes it clear that parables were for Jesus’ true followers. If I may be so bold, the Joel Osteen crowd, and other such groups, don’t get them. Those with hardened hearts cannot understand deep truth. J. Wallace Hamilton wisely said, “Our modern age is a pushover for the shallow and the shortcut. We want to change everything except the human heart.”⁷

What, then, was the emphasis at the birth of the Church? Acts 2:42 documents this for us: “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Is it not interesting that there is nothing here about cultural relevance, “appealing to seekers,” or addressing “felt needs”? There’s not even a single word about music here (or anywhere else in Acts), while today this has become by far the main emphasis and prominent feature.

Coming to the Epistles, a key verse is 1 Timothy 4:13: “Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” “Give attendance” translates *prosechō*, which was a nautical term for holding a ship in a direction, to sail onward. The idea, then, was “to hold on one’s course.” And what course was Timothy to hold? Not entertainment or “felt needs,” rather on the Word of God alone. Specifically, Timothy’s course was to be set on three emphases.

First, *reading*. The definite article (“the”) appears before “reading,” indicating the specific practice of public reading. Because of the scarcity of manuscripts, the practice of reading and explaining Scripture in the synagogue (Acts 15:21 and Luke 4:16f) was carried over into the church (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). First and foremost, then, it is the reading of God’s Word that should fill our churches.

Second, Timothy’s course was to be set on *exhortation*. The Greek (*paraklēsis*) refers to an admonition or encouragement for the purpose of strengthening and establishing the believer in the faith (see Rom. 15:4; Phil. 2:1; Heb. 12:5; 13:22). In short, *exhortation* is the *application* of the *exposition* of Scripture. Expository preaching has all but vanished today, but exposition—which by its very nature will be doctrinal—is what will challenge God’s people to obey the Truth of God’s Word and warn them of the consequences of not doing so.

Third, Timothy’s course was to be set on *doctrine*. There’s that word again. To the ancient Greeks, *didaskalia* meant imparting information and later the teaching of skills. Another Greek word translated *doctrine* is *didachē*. While its basic meaning is also “teaching,” it places more stress upon what is taught than does *didaskalia*. A noted Greek authority says this about *didachē*:

Paul's use of *didachē* in Romans and I Corinthians may be contrasted with the usage found in the Pastoral Epistles. In the former epistles the scope of the word is left undefined, whereas in the Pastorals (cf. II Tim 4:2; Tit. 1:9) *didachē* has probably become a given body of doctrine which is to be inculcated as such.⁸

The vital meaning of *didachē*, then, is that it speaks of what is being taught, that is, *a body of doctrine*. A key verse here is 2 Timothy 4:2, where we find the crucial significance of *didachē*. Writing to pastor Timothy, Paul declared with no ambiguity, apology, or alternative: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." He goes on in verses 3 and 4 to give a reason for this, namely, that the time will come when people will not put up with this and will seek teachers who will humor them and tickle their ears to entertain them. In spite of such attitudes, however, Paul commands Timothy to preach anyway, *to change absolutely nothing in his method*. The modern idea that methods must change with the times is a lie.

Writing to *another* pastor, Paul declared the exact same crucial responsibility of leadership: "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers" (Titus 1:9). To further cement this concept, Paul added to Timothy: "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13). "Form" is *hupotupōsin*, which refers to "a pattern, sketch, or outline." Paul impresses upon Timothy that there is a definite pattern or outline of doctrine that he taught his student. Why? So Timothy would be thoroughly grounded in the Word of God and thereby able to discern false teaching. Only doctrine does that.

What was Timothy to do with such doctrine? He was to teach other men so that they could in-turn teach others (2 Tim. 2:2). We also read in 1 Timothy 4:6: "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things [i.e., "the word of God and prayer" in verse 5], thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained." It is doctrine and prayer-soaked teaching that nourishes and builds up God's people and is the epitome of a "good minister."

Neither is all this confined to the New Testament. The Old Testament repeatedly emphasizes the critical nature of truth, doctrine, and teaching. A fascinating incident appears in Isaiah 28:9. The corrupt prophets and priests were disgusted by Isaiah and asked with contempt: "Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts?" In other words, who are you treat us like children with endless repetition of the same things? We can think for ourselves." They went on in verse 10 to mimic that great man of God as if he were speaking baby talk: "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a lit-

tle." Likewise, many today say, "We are too sophisticated, too well-read, too well-informed for old, out of date doctrine. We are modern and relevant."

With all that in mind, and many more verses we could cite, it continues to amaze me that something as clear as this mandate to teach doctrine to God's people can be so easily ignored by much of the church's leadership today. *Popular thought* has replaced the *principles of Truth*.

This leads us to consider for a moment the true **old paths** of theology that have also all but vanished. Throughout the history of the Church, every time the historic Doctrines of Sovereign Grace have been challenged, those challenges have been humiliatingly defeated. Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, Arminianism, and a whole horde of other heresies have repeatedly arisen in an attempt to destroy, or at the very least dilute, the true Gospel, and every time they have been exposed for what they are. And so it is again today, but sadly with unprecedented success. The historic doctrines of the Reformation, which themselves are woven into the very fabric of Scripture, are under violent attack, and the attackers are winning. It is sad, indeed, not to mention catastrophic, that Arminianism, Pragmatism, and Relativism rule most of today's church with an iron hand. Things that throughout church history were recognized as heresy are now the *status quo* of orthodoxy. Where are the men who will return to the **old paths**?

Having considered the old path of *doctrine*, this leads us to consider briefly the other side of that coin.

II. The Old Path of Duty

Again, a popular mantra nowadays is that doctrine is not practical. Such statements demonstrate either a total ignorance of Scripture at best or deliberate deception for ulterior motive at worst. Doctrine is most certainly practical. A case in point (or actually cases) is the consistent practice of Paul in his Epistles of first presenting *doctrine* and then *duty*. In Ephesians, for example, chapters 1–3 deal with *doctrine* (our *riches* in Christ), while chapters 4–6 apply that doctrine to *duty* (our *responsibilities* in Christ).

Of the many duties of the Christian, for example, the chief is godliness. Salvation is a transforming experience, and the result of true conversion is godly behavior. Paul made this clear in Ephesians 2:10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them," which he then enumerates in chapters 4–6. He also made this clear to the Corinthians: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

It is doctrine, therefore, that results in the production of godly behavior. Writing again to Timothy, Paul declared:

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about

questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself. (1 Tim. 6:3–6)

The principle here could not be clearer: *There is a definite correlation between truth and godliness and error and ungodliness.* In other words, right doctrine will produce right conduct, while wrong doctrine will produce wrong conduct. *Period.* This truth is not only biblical, but also logical. Why? Because how can we *live* right and *do* right unless we *know* right? And knowledge *always* comes by doctrine. Truth cannot be *discovered*; it must be *revealed*.

Another duty of doctrine is obedience. The modern teachings of easy-believism, no lordship, no repentance, and others are simply additional heresies that have further contributed to the decline of the true Christian message. *Obedience is implicit in the Gospel.* Our Lord made the issue clear: “If ye love me, keep my commandments. . . . If a man love me, he will keep my words . . . He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings” (John 14:15, 23, 24). The Apostle John picked up on this and wrote in his first Epistle:

Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked. (1 John 2:3–6).

All this is *duty* that flows from *doctrine*. Is duty the *cause* of salvation? Of course not, for that would be works salvation. But duty (like works) is most certainly the *result* of salvation and evidence of it.

Another aspect of such obedience is that it continues in the believer’s life as he or she is exposed to the Word of God. One might know the Bible from cover to cover, be able to recite every doctrine, plumb every prophecy, and quote entire passages, but if there is little or no obedience, knowledge means nothing. Knowledge without application is less than worthless—it’s actually destructive. As Paul told the Corinthians, “knowledge puffeth up, but [love] edifieth” (I Cor. 8:1). Facts simply make us arrogant. It’s the application that makes us humble.

For example, when you *read*, “Lie not to one another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds” (Col. 3:9), then *obey* it by never saying anything with the intent to deceive, embellish, or mislead. When you *read*, “The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly” (Prov. 26:22), as well as, “The tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (Jas. 3:5), then *obey* it by never gossiping and being careful about every word you say. As

Paul commands, “Let your speech be always with grace seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man” (Col. 4:6). When you *read*, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10), along with, “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), then *obey* it by striving never to be the cause of a disunity or disharmony among God’s people. Reading a command of God without obeying it is *rebellion*, and if we disobey God’s Word, *chastisement* will come in one form or another. And the more knowledge we have the more responsible we are for it and the more serious is the disobeying of it.

We could continue, but I think the challenge is clear. Are we going to walk the new paths of contemporary thought, which change daily and result in our wandering aimlessly through the wilderness? I fear we have not only left the **old paths**, but have reseeded them to erase that they ever existed. Or are we going to clear away the overgrowth and walk the **old paths** that lead straight and true to the destination of glory? Let us, indeed, walk the **old paths**, the paths that were trodden by such men as, to name only a few: Gresham Machen (1881–1937), Charles Spurgeon (1834–92), J. C. Ryle (1816–1900), Robert Dabney (1820–1898), Charles Hodge (1797–1878), John Dagg (1794–1884), Jonathon Edwards (1703–1758), George Whitefield (1714–1770), John Owen (1616–1683), John Gill (1697–1771), John Calvin (1509–64), John Knox (1505–72), Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Huss (1369–1415), Augustine (354–430), Athanasius (293–373), the Apostles, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Himself.

My dear Christian Friend, let us walk the **old paths** for the praise of God’s glory and **rest for [our] souls**, not the new ones that lead to ruin. Let us never say, as did the Judeans, **We will not walk therein.**

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NOTES

¹ This article based upon a sermon by the author.

² *Jensen’s Survey of the Old Testament* (Moody), p. 336.

³ *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1906), Vol. 8, p. 444.

⁴ “Why Doctrinal Preaching Declines” in Ian H. Murray, *The Life of Arthur W. Pink* (Banner of Truth, 1981), pp. 217–18.

⁵ *Life in the Spirit* (Baker), pp. 142–143.

⁶ *Metropolitan Tabernacles Pulpit*, Vol. 37 (1891), p. 233 (on Eph. 6:17).

⁷ *The Thunder of Bare Feet: Sermons on Christian Social Concerns* (Fleming H. Revell, 1964), p. 69.

⁸ Colin Brown (Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), vol. 3, p. 770.

We pray that our readers share the burden presented in this month's article and will, therefore, share it with others. Please make copies and pass them on to other believers and Christian leaders. This article is also available in PDF format and on our website (<http://www.thescripturealone.com/TOTT-55.htm>).

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