



# Truth On Tough Texts

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## *Where Has Our Discernment Gone? (1)*

### **Ephesians 4:14**

The great Napoleon often told the tale of when he was visiting a certain province and came upon an old soldier with one severed arm. On his uniform he displayed the coveted Legion of Honor. “Where did you lose your arm?” Napoleon asked. “At Austerlitz, Sire,” came the soldier’s brisk reply. “And for that you received the Legion of Honor?” “Yes, Sire. It is but a small token to pay for the decoration.” Then the emperor said, “You must be the kind of man who regrets he did not lose both arms for his country.” “What then would have been my reward?” asked the one-armed man. “Then,” Napoleon replied, “I would have awarded you a double Legion of Honor.” With that the proud, old fighter drew his sword and immediately cut off his other arm. The story was circulated for years, until one day someone asked, “How?”<sup>1</sup>

Ponder further, sometimes we accept sayings simply because they are pithy, such as the Earl of Kent’s remark in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, “The stars above us govern our conditions.”<sup>2</sup> This is just one of many references to that day’s common belief in Astrology. Other times we accept a proverb because it matches our own philosophy, such as the famous declaration often attributed to Green-bay Packer coach Vince Lombardi but actually said by another football coach, Red Sanders, in 1953, “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.”<sup>3</sup>

People accept such ideas and uncounted more simply because they lack *discernment*, from the Latin *discernere*, comprised of *dis*, “apart,” and *cernere*, “to sift.” As we’ll see in detail, the Bible constantly, over and over again, emphasizes this principle, to separate and distinguish between, in order to see and understand

the difference. But far worse is how the lack of discernment has marched into the church like a plague of Driver Ants consuming everything in its path. Lost in the Church today is the ability to discern, to see the difference between truth and error. And the few who do dare discern are labeled “unloving,” “divisive,” and “intolerant.”

So what does Scripture say about discernment? In this issue of **Truth On Tough Texts** (and the next) I would like to submit my burdened evaluation.

### **Characteristics of Spiritual Children**

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.** While this verse is not a “Tough Text” because of a grammar problem, historical uncertainty, controversial issue, or other such matter, it’s tough for another reason. This is a “Tough Text” because it’s a verse that is hard to face, a verse that *demand*s that we “grow up” and make narrow judgments about doctrine and practice.

Ephesians 4:14 is probably the most graphic description in Scripture of the immature, unguided, undiscerning Christian. As the words **henceforth be no more children**, so the first thing Paul says is that this must cease. There are several characteristics of children that apply to the spiritually immature Christian.

*First*, children are *ignorant*. The Greek for **children** is *nēpios*, which is a combination of *nē* (“not”) and *epos*

(“word”), so the literal idea is “one who cannot speak, that is, an infant.” Metaphorically, it pictures one who is “unlearned, unenlightened, simple, innocent,”<sup>4</sup> and even “foolish”; when the ancient Greek philosophers wished to dismiss someone who was foolish in his views, they would use *nēpios* with biting sarcasm.<sup>5</sup> Writing to Christians in Greek society, Paul challenged the Corinthians, “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (I Cor. 13:11).

This point is, indeed, profound. After becoming a father, I often found myself thinking, “This child ought to know *something*, but he doesn’t; we’ve got to teach him *everything*.” And children will believe anything. They’ll *believe* there is a Santa Clause because we tell them there is (which really doesn’t say much for us, does it?). They’ll also *try* anything. They’ll try to see what small objects will fit into an electrical outlet, they’ll run into the street, they’ll eat the family dog’s food, and other things we wouldn’t believe unless we saw them. *And that is precisely Paul’s point.* The immature Christian knows either nothing at all or so little that he constantly gets himself into trouble.

*Second*, children are *impulsive*; they are **tossed to and fro**. This phrase is a single word in the Greek, *klu-dōnizomai*, an old nautical term “meaning to be tossed by the waves.”<sup>6</sup> Children have a short attention span. They bounce from one thing to another. Babies will be drawn to a moving object one minute and a shiny one the next. Toddlers will play with a toy one minute and the box it came in the next. Immature Christians are the same, bouncing from one opinion to another, one teaching to another, with no discernment of which is better or even right. They’ll just grab onto anything and run with it. This leads to another characteristic.

*Third*, children are *impressionable*; they are **carried about with every wind of doctrine**. **Carried about** is *peripherō*, which pictures being carried around in circles, that is, being directionless, just driven here and there with no guidance. As Greek expositor John Eadie puts it, “The billow does not swell and fall on the same spot, but it is carried about by the wind, driven hither and thither before it—the sport of the tempest.”<sup>7</sup> It’s also significant that the definite article (“the”) appears before **doctrine** in the Greek (*tēs didaskalias*)—“every wind of *the* doctrine”—showing that false teachers are very deliberate; they don’t have a general doctrine, rather a definite, calculated, and well formulated doctrine to teach. Most cults illustrate this vividly; as wrong as the doctrine is, it is nonetheless systemized, organized, and well devised. As a result, whatever the false teacher’s **doctrine** is, the immature, undiscerning Christian is just carried along by it until the next teaching blows in and carries him somewhere else. One pastor boldly asserts

the habits of the spiritually immature Christian when he writes:

There is a flightiness and instability to their lives . . . They dash in a dither toward every new religious fad, they seem more excited about the latest religious book than about the one Great Book, they rush from seminar to conference, hanging on to the words of the latest Christian guru, they change their spiritual and doctrinal mindset as often as they change their socks. With them, prophecy becomes a hobby, and spirituality becomes the latest craze.<sup>8</sup>

How true! From the days of Bill Gothard’s “Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts” decades ago, to Bill McCartney’s “Promise Keepers” more recently, to Rick Warren’s “Purpose Driven Life” today, it’s been this fad, that book, and this other movement, one after the other, year after year. The picture painted by **wind** is also graphic. Just as the **wind** surrounds us when it blows, so all kinds of teaching surround us. This demands, therefore, that we discern its direction—we must examine where it *comes from*, what it *carries*, and where it’s *headed*.

Another pastor, theologian, and professor tells of being at a denominational meeting one day when a pastor rose and shared his heart about the evil results of paraecclesiastical movements. As is frequently true, parishioners, who often know little of God’s truth, go to some large popular meeting, learn something new and exciting, and return to their church and boldly announce that the pastor is not doing things right. After all, the popular speaker has a huge following, and the pastor only a little one. As this writer rightly observes, “These popular movements violate every principle of church organization.”<sup>9</sup> Far worse, however, these tear down the Local Church and undermine the leadership of such faithful shepherds.

*Fourth* and finally, children are *indulgent*. If there is one thing that characterizes a child more than anything else, it’s that he wants to play, he wants to be entertained, he wants to have fun, he’s self-absorbed. And that’s not only true of the immature Christian today but most of the Church as a whole. The seeker-sensitive movement has inevitably led to entertainment as the driving force of Church “ministry.” This started decades ago with just children and youth ministries that kept the kids entertained, but now *it defines the whole Church*. There is literally every form of entertainment in the Church today that is found in the world: all genres of music concerts, dramas, movies, standup comedy, dances, sports, and even—I’m not making this up—gambling and strippers.

To raise money, one church in Surrey, England sponsored “Rodent Roulette,” in which they put a mouse in a box that has several holes in the sides of it, put a cup

over the mouse, spin the box around a few times, take bets on which hole the mouse will use to exit the box, and then release it.

*Christianity Today* once reported of an incident that took place in Richardson, Texas. On one Sunday, Pastor William Nichols of the First Unitarian Church invited Diana King, a Unitarian from Fort Worth, to take part in the service. She did, and when she was through, all that she was wearing was a G-string. The congregation of 200 adults and children watched in fascinated silence as Miss King—an exotic dancer at a Dallas nightspot—shed her clothes in time with recorded music. The pastor said that the dance fit “very well into our service” and nobody complained. He also said he didn’t think anyone was aroused, “but I don’t consider the erotic aspect of the dance wrong. After all, that’s the way we were conceived.” Miss King said it was something she wanted to do for a long time, and she would like to conduct classes for women church members. She commented, “I would like to do a sermon using the exotic dance, and members of the congregation could join me if they liked.”

At this point, many would say, “Oh, those are just isolated incidents in liberal churches.” Really? Consider Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco, a church that once preached the Gospel and was soundly evangelistic. Today it has this “Call to Worship” in its printed bulletin on Sunday and recited by the leader: “We are all of us Christians—Jews, liberals, Bolsheviks, anarchists, socialists, Communists, Keynesians, Democrats, Civil Righters, Beatniks, ministers, moderate Republicans, pacifists, teach-inners, doctors, scientists, professors, Latin Americans, New Africans, Common Marketers, even Mao Tse-Tung. Doubtless. From Lyndon Johnson to Mao Tse-Tung, we are all Christians.” Its services are performed in the mode of the modern dance. Participants gyrate suggestively, and the church has become a haven for dope addicts, homosexuals, and sexpots.

Or how about one great New York City church that was originally built in honor of the great missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson? Apostasy has closed in on that church, and from what goes on there it has no right to be called a church. They put on a show one Flag Day, a show supposedly “dedicated to the stars and stripes.” There were depraved and obscene exhibits defiling the flag, and according to Max Geldman in the conservative political publication *National Review*, there were exhibits that were “simply unquotable.” The show was so offensive that the police closed it. On another occasion, the pews were removed to make room for dancing and the people sat in circles of folding chairs. The pulpit had been removed for a presentation of “Winnie the Pooh” and had not been replaced. The place where the choir used to be is vacant. On one Sunday a nude couple danced there during the service.<sup>10</sup>

Yes, I freely admit that those are extreme examples, *but I also submit that philosophically they are no different than any church today that resorts to entertainment in any form.* So-called “ministry” today is built on “giving people what they want,” “appealing to felt-needs,” and “user-friendliness.” It is specifically geared to the flesh and thrives in an atmosphere of spiritual immaturity.

But Paul is not done yet!

## The Sources of False Doctrine

Paul adds that such false doctrine comes in three ways.

*First, by the sleight of men.* Here is a fascinating term. The word **sleight** is by far the best translation of the Greek *kubeia*, from *kubos* (English “cube”) and appears only here in the New Testament. The Greek literally means “playing dice” and the translation **sleight** graphically pictures the implication of the gambling, trickery, and fraud that is involved. We can picture this easily by thinking of how many people throw away billions of dollars on gambling. In 1946 the gangster Ben “Bugsy” Siegel opened the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas, which was at first a disaster—nobody came to a hotel/casino in the middle of nowhere. The price tag that began at two million dollars swelled to six, for which Siegel was eventually murdered by his associates because they figured he was skimming money. The casino turned around, however, and made four million dollars in its first year, which grew to tens of *billions* to the present day, and all of it by *kubos*. The house edge in Roulette, for example, is 2.7% for single zero and 5.26% for double zero. The edge is even worse for other games: 4.5% for Sportsbook Betting, 3.9% to 15.2% for various slot machines, and an unbelievable 25% for Keno.

I was also reminded of the old scam, Three-Card Monte, in which the expert scam artist lays three cards on the table, one of which is a queen, shuffles them back and forth, and then asks you to “find the lady.” You’ll win at first, but when the bet increases, you’ll lose because of a sleight of hand trick. The dealer picks up two cards with his right hand, the upper card between his thumb and his forefinger and the lower card between his thumb and his middle finger, with a small gap between both cards. According to common sense, and is, in fact, what he did before, the dealer should drop the lower card first, but this time his forefinger smoothly and slyly ejects the upper card first, which causes you to lose track of the queen. This is especially difficult to see if the dealer’s hand makes a sweeping move from his left side toward his right side while he drops the cards. The moral of the story is: *you are going to lose.*

*That* is the false teacher. By “sleight of mouth” he tricks the unwary without their even knowing it because they are gullible and over-confident in their knowledge.

Pride gets the Three Card Monte victim every time; he's confident he can follow the Queen, but he can't because of the **sleight** of hand—the hand *is* quicker than the eye. Likewise, immature Christians are over-confident in their supposed knowledge and are easy prey for false teachers. That is precisely why Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Miletus that “grievous wolves [will] 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” (Acts 20:29-30).

*Second*, false doctrine comes by **cunning craftiness**, which is one word in the Greek, *panourgia*, a compound word from two roots, *pan* (“all”) and *erg* (“work”), yielding the meaning “capable of all work,” or as Aristotle viewed it, “an unprincipled [capability] to do anything.”<sup>11</sup> *That* is the false teacher. He will do anything, stoop to any level needed to manipulate error, to make something look like truth and thereby lead others away from truth. Paul also uses this word in II Corinthians 2:2, where believers should “[renounce] the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.”

The Jehovah's Witness, for example, deceitfully alters the Greek text of John 1:1 to read, “In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.” Where does *The New World Translation* get this rendering? Supposedly, it is based on the “oldest manuscripts,” which can be easily shown to be patently false. Also, it was translated thusly from the German by Johannes Greber in 1937, a former Catholic priest turned spiritist who claimed the translation came from God's spirits. Indeed, men will do anything to make their teaching look like truth when it is the very opposite.

*Third*, false doctrine comes by delusion and deception (**they lie in wait to deceive**). The Greek behind **lie in wait** (*methododeia*, English “method”) does not appear in Greek literature prior to the New Testament,<sup>12</sup> where it means “to investigate by settled plan” or “a deliberate planning or system.”<sup>13</sup> There is, therefore, a settled plan, an elaborate system, a deliberate scheme behind those who teach false doctrine. Their desire to is to **deceive**, Paul says, which translates *planē*, “a wandering out of the right way” and, therefore, figuratively delusion and error. I Thessalonians 2:10-11 speak of the lost multitude that will believe the Antichrist, and for that very reason God will “send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie.” While that day is not yet here, delusion, error, and seduction are everywhere.

What is even more tragic is how many true believers there are who are gullible and will believe virtually anything and follow almost anybody. Even with our unequaled education, freedom, sophistication, access to God's Word, Christian books, and a multitude of Bible translations (which I am convinced is actually part of the problem), it seems that *anybody, no matter what he teaches*, can get a following and even financial support from not only individual Christians, but entire Local Churches and even whole denominations, associations, and fellowships. Like little children, they are captivated by something new: a new interpretation, a new idea, a new catchy phrase or term, a new method of “ministry,” and countless other things.

What, then, is the key to discernment? There is only a single principle: *What does the Word of God say?* It doesn't matter if some new idea or teaching “sounds good,” but whether or not it's right according to Scripture. At the very heart of the Reformation was *Sola Scriptura* (“Scripture Alone”) that dictates all we believe and practice, not Church Tradition, human opinion, or anything else. For centuries Roman Catholicism has been adding its traditions to Scripture, and even incorporating pagan practices (and even gods) into its system, but Evangelicalism is not much better as it also adds men's teachings, methods, and ministries to Scripture. How we need a new Reformation today!

We'll prayerfully continue our exploration next month. May God bless you as you diligently discern.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, (Garland, Texas: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996).

<sup>2</sup> IV.iii.32-33.

<sup>3</sup> The actual saying by Vince Lombardi in a 1962 interview was, “Winning isn't everything, but wanting to win is.” Both cited in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, p. 783.

<sup>4</sup> Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary, NT*, p. 1009-10.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 281.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Wuest's *Word Studies*. (John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek of Text of Ephesians*: “tossed about as a surge,” p. 315).

<sup>7</sup> Eadie, p. 315.

<sup>8</sup> Ray Stedman, *Our Riches in Christ: Ephesians*, p. 229.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Clark, *Ephesians*, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Four preceding illustrations from Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, Vol. 1, p. 412.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, Vol. 3, p. 943.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Thayer's *Greek/English Lexicon* and Wuest respectively.

As to their question, How can we be assured that this has sprung from God unless we have recourse to the decrees of the church?, it is as if someone asked: Whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste. – John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.vii.4.

Why are the Scriptures called the rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God? Because all *doctrines* which we are bound to believe must be measured or judged of; all *duties* which we are bound to practice as means in order to the attainment of this chief end of man, must be squared or conformed unto this rule. – Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, p. 22.

Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and Prophets, then in the writings of the Apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of the Word. – John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.9.8

**Truth seldom goes without a scratched face. – John Trapp**

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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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