



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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Where Has Our Discernment Gone? (2)

Ephesians 4:14

LAST MONTH WE CONSIDERED EPHESIANS 4:14: “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.”

As we submitted, this verse is not a “Tough Text” because of a grammar problem, historical uncertainty, controversial issue, or other such matter, but it’s tough for another reason—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.

Last time we examined two considerations: Characteristics of Spiritual Children and Sources of False Doctrine. We continue this month with a third.

Tests of Discernment

Let’s practice our discernment skills for a few moments. One popular speaker, for example, gives this description of one whose “felt need” should be addressed:

You have a guy sitting in church and he’s figuring out, “Okay, how am I going to make payroll? How am I going to finance my lifestyle? I’ve got these two kids that are rebellious; they’re caught up in this lack of authority thing. My emotional connection with my wife is really running dry. I’m sitting with three strangers next to me listening to this sermon. I need some help for my life right now.” I believe that’s the way Jesus taught. I mean Jesus started at the point of the real and felt need that a person would have.

That certainly sounds good, noble, and caring, but is it *right* according to Scripture? No, it is *not*. The Lord Jesus simply did *not* start with a person’s “felt need,” which has become a term on which many churches are built today. In His dealing with the woman at the well (Jn. 4:1-26), he very specifically confronted her with her sin and then even taught her some doctrine on worship. He most certainly did not start with a “felt need,” rather *real sin*.

Another popular voice boldly says this:

People are always telling me that we should go back to the New Testament church where they were pure. Are you crazy? Where they loved each other. You’re out of your mind. Where they joined hands and walked off into the sunset together. That’s not the way it was. You haven’t taken the time to read the Bible. They were as bad as we are, and sometimes they were worse. And I get along better with people at the seminary than Paul got along with Barnabus.

That sounds authoritative coming from the mouth of a well-know Bible teacher, but is it *right*? No, it is *not*. In fact, it borderlines on blasphemy. It is that man who has “not read the Bible,” for Luke records that the early church

continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon *every* soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And *all that believed* were together, and had *all things*

common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, *continuing daily* with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

Were there controversies and problems as the Church continued? Of course, there were, as in Acts 6 and 15, as well as other mentions of doctrinal and practical issues, such as as in most of I Corinthians. But those were exceptions to the general rule. This man’s comment clearly implies that he knows a better way, that we can actually improve on the Biblical record, *and that is heresy*.

Here is another quote, which is, in fact, one of the most common teachings of our day:

The unity of the faith is more important than doctrinal opinion.

Again, that sounds loving, but is it *right*? No, it is *not*. As Paul told Titus, a pastor of a local church, the pastor has been entrusted with God’s word and is, therefore, *required* to, “[Hold] 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 [i.e., refute those who oppose that doctrine]” (Tit. 1:7a, 9; emphasis added). Unity is most certainly not more important than correct doctrine, no matter who says anything to the contrary.

Another speaker, who was shouting in a hateful tone, said this:

I *refuse* to argue any longer with any of you out there! Don’t even call me if you want to argue doctrine, if you want to straighten somebody out . . . Get out of my life! I don’t want to even talk to you or even hear you! I don’t want to see your ugly face! I say get out of God’s way, quit blocking God’s bridges. Or God’s going to shoot you if I don’t. Let Him sort out all this doctrinal doo-doo. I don’t care about it!

Even if we ignore the ranting and raving, is such teaching about doctrine *right*? No, it is *not*. I Timothy 4:16 could not be clearer: “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” Neither could Proverbs 30:5-6, “Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.”

Still another speaker explained “doctrine” this way:

I want you to know the word doctrine. Circle it. It happens to be the matter of, if you’re taking notes,

the how you do the what you do. That’s what it means—doctrine, the way you do the what you do. Yea, there’s a certain way I get dressed, there’s a certain way you get dressed. Men, you put your socks on first and then your pants or you put your pants on first and then your socks. So, let me tell you something, depending upon how you dress, that happens to be your doctrine. The way you brush your teeth—do you squeeze the tube from the bottom, from the top, do you roll it? That would happen to be a matter of doctrine. You see, doctrine is just a word that describes your daily routine.

We shouldn’t even have to ask if such a notion is biblical because it is so foolish, so childish, so contrary to even the simplest dictionary definition of “doctrine” that it’s unbelievable that anyone would listen to a man like that.

Another well-known speaker counsels Christians with these sage words:

If you’re sure that you’re right, for God’s sake don’t correct those who are wrong. If you’re sure that you’re pure, for God’s sake don’t correct those who aren’t. If you’re sure that you’ve got it together, for God’s sake don’t try to fix somebody who isn’t. From your position of righteousness and purity and balance, you’ll kill the church.

Yes, this sounds loving and unifying, but is it *true* biblically? No, it is *not*. As Paul declared to the Corinthians: “Do not ye judge them that are within [the church]? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves [i.e., the church] that wicked person” (I Cor. 5:12-13). And as he likewise commanded Pastor Timothy, “As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine” (I Tim. 1:3). He goes on to state in verse 5 that the goal of such action is true, biblical love.

To illustrate, if I knew that a flashflood had washed out a bridge, would it be loving and compassionate for me to stand by the railroad tracks smiling and waving at the passengers on an Amtrak train as it hurtled toward the chasm? Of course not! True love desires to warn people of coming doom.

Paul even goes so far to mention *by name* those who were teaching false doctrine in verses 18-20 (“Hymenaeus and Alexander”). Today such an act is considered unloving and divisive, even if what they are teaching is hurting people and destroying biblical Truth. Commenting on Paul’s challenge to Timothy to “preach the Word” and “reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (II Tim. 4:2), theologian Gordon Clark writes:

Paul denounced heretics publicly by name. It is not enough to give diplomatic, spineless, uninformative warnings against unidentified errors. They must be clearly explained and clearly refuted. Some in the congregation may think refutation is useless and tedious. But Paul commands the preachers to persevere in their instruction with all patience.¹

In spite of that absolutely crystal clear Truth, the Senior Pastor of a mega-church in California writes:

How tragic it is when we become more concerned with being “right” than being “loving.” I would rather have the wrong facts and a right attitude, than right facts and a wrong attitude.

That is not only childishly foolish, but it blatantly contradicts Ephesians 4:15, where Paul says we do BOTH: we *speak the truth* and we do so *in love*. One without the other will always bring heresy.

Still another teacher authoritatively declares:

[One] big lie is that God only wants three things from us; he wants “the three G’s:” He wants groveling, groaning, and He wants grieving; He wants us to cry and grieve over our sin. What a big lie!

While that might certainly liberate us in our way of living our lives, is it Biblically *true*? No, it is *not*. As God declares in James 4:9-10, “Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up,” and in Isaiah 66:2, “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.”

Another teacher characterizes God this way:

God is a God of grace. You can curse Him and disobey Him and spit in His face and reject Him, and you can do it over and over and over again, and He keeps coming back for more.²

Is such a characterization of God *biblical*? No, it is *not*. It flies in the face of the Truth that “the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man” (Gen. 3:6) and that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). But even more profound are God’s words in Hebrews 10:26-31:

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the

blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Another vivid example of the gullibility and undiscerning nature of Christianity today is the virtual cult that has arisen around the hugely popular book *The Prayer of Jabez*. One author’s indictment is right on the mark, calling this book “the most mesmerizing deception to be launched on American Christianity in the modern era.”³ Why? Because, as another author puts it, the basic, underlying error of the book is “that the repetition of a prayer, any prayer, even a Biblical prayer, unlocks the power of God in our lives.”⁴ The whole thrust of the book is that by repeating this obscure Old Testament prayer (a clear violation of the prohibition of “vain repetition” in Matt. 6:8), the Christian can unlock blessing and miracles. All it boils down to be is old prosperity teaching in a new wrapper, and to be blunt once more, it’s heresy plain and simple. Over and over again (*ad infinitum, ad nauseam*) the author promises prosperity and miracles with such statements as the following:

- “God wants [us] to be ‘selfish’ in [our] prayers. To ask for more—and more again—from our Lord . . . [and is] exactly the kind of request our Father longs to hear” (*although Scripture nowhere says any of that*).
- “A guaranteed by-product” of saying the Jabez prayer will be that “your life will become marked by miracles” (*but again, that’s not promised either in the so-called “Jabez Prayer” or anywhere else in Scripture*).
- “Seeking God’s blessing is our ultimate act of worship” (*but not one verse of Scripture says that; it is totally the author’s conjecture*).⁵

And on we could go. While this book is filled with warm anecdotes, personal experience, and boundless conjecture, totally absent are solid theology and hermeneutics, Scripture exposition, and Divine Truth. When I first read this book, my immediate reaction was, “Where has our discernment gone?” Hence the title of these articles.

I also never cease to be amazed at how something novel, clever, pithy, and even shocking is received with glorious excitement by the Church today. An example of is found in another popular book, *Desiring God*, written by John Piper. While he does say some very good things, his entire premise is based on his *absolutely ridiculous* term “Christian Hedonism.” What he means by this term is a call to abandon the short-term, low-yield pleasures

of the world for the magnificent joys of knowing God in whom is fullness of joy, but to use the term “hedonism” is utterly ludicrous.

In Classical Greek, the term *hēdonē* (from which hedonism is derived) ultimately came to refer “to the pleasure of the senses, of sex, and then the unrestricted passions.” This meaning is clearly carried over into the New Testament, where the term appears only five times, all in “later books,” and *always* with “a bad connotation.”⁶

The point here is why *invent* a term that you then have to spend several pages (or even a whole book) defending and explaining? Why not write a book on a *biblical* term, such as the word JOY (Greek *chara*)? Piper could have written his entire book based on that *biblical* word and done it much more easily. Why not do so? Why manufacture a provocative and contradictory term that has nothing whatsoever to do with real joy? Is the reason simply cleverness and marketability or is it a misunderstanding of language? In either case, it misses the Truth.

It is because of such shallowness and faddishness in the Church today that I read far more of the older, tried and tested expositors than I do contemporary writers, though there are, of course, some good authors today. In the present case, for example, the reader would be much better off reading 17th Century Puritan Stephen Charnock’s classic, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, which provides a lifetime of meditation.

Let me share one more discernment test. A well-known husband and wife team, whose desire is to reach millions for Christ, claim that an angel appeared to the woman and told her how to get instant decisions for Christ. For example, if you are talking to a waitress, you should ask her, “Do you know that there are two kinds of beautiful waitresses?” “Really?” she would probably respond. “Yes, those who are saved and those who are about to be. Which one are you?” If she says anything

except, “I am saved,” then say, “Repeat this after me, ‘Father forgive me of my sins. Jesus come into my heart. Make me the kind of person You want me to be. Thank You for saving me’” Now ask the waitress, “Where is Jesus right now?” If she answers, “In my heart,” say, “Congratulations on being a child of God!” If her answer is anything else, have her repeat the prayer after you again. This couple also insists, “When you talk to someone, use the same words the angel said. It works! If you change the words, it does not work.”⁷

That approach and ones similar to it are commonplace. While some teachers would never say that an angel revealed their new method to them, they might as well because they think they can improve on God’s method of confronting the sinner with His sin, showing him God’s demand for repentance or eternity in Hell, and then sharing with Him God’s gracious provision in Christ.

We’ll conclude this vital subject next month with a final challenge to discernment.

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NOTES

- ¹ Gordon Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1983), p. 188.
- ² The seven preceding examples taken from actual radio and TV broadcasts of either interviews, sermons, or other public presentations by nationally known Bible teachers and authors.
- ³ Steve Hopkins, *The Cult of Jabez* (Bethal Press, 2002).
- ⁴ Gary E. Gilley, “I Just Wanted More Land” —*Jabez* (Xulon Press, 2001).
- ⁵ Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), pp. 19, 24-25, 49.
- ⁶ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, pp. 458-9.
- ⁷ Cited in Kirk Cameron and Ron Comfort, *The Way of the Master* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002) p. 87.

[Truth] is the great treasure, which God delivers to His saints, with a strict and solemn charge to keep against all that undermine or oppose it. Some things we trust God with, some things God trusts us with. . . . That which God trusts us chiefly with is His Truth.

William Gurnall – *The Christian in Complete Armour*
Vol. I, p. 306

“And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore.” The Israelites probably made the same mistake, fixing their hope on this new method of fighting the Philistines, which they hoped would bring them victory. We are all so apt to think that the new plan of going to work will be much more effective than those that have become familiar; but it is not so. It is generally a mistake to exchange old lamps for new. “There hath not been such a thing heretofore.” There is a glamour about the novelty which misleads us, and we are liable to think the newer is the truer. If there has not been such a thing heretofore, some people will take to it for that very ready. “Oh,” says the man who is given to change, “that is the thing for me!” But it is probably not the thing for a true-hearted and intelligent Christian, for if “there hath not been such a thing heretofore,” it is difficult to explain, if the thing be a good one, why the Holy Ghost, who has been with the people of God since Pentecost, and who came to lead us into all truth, had not led the Church of God to this before. If your new discovery is the mind of God, where has Holy Scripture been all these centuries? Believing in the infallible Word and the abiding Spirit, I rather suspect your novelty; at least, I cannot say that I endorse it until I have tested it by the Word of God.

Charles Spurgeon – *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*
Vol. 38, pp. 25-36

Not to desire [Truth] is to despise it.

William Gurnall – *The Christian in Complete Armour*
Vol. I, p. 294

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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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