

A Call for Discernment, Part 1

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

52-32

We return in our study of God's Word this morning to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. As we are fast coming to the conclusion of this wonderful epistle, we find ourselves this morning looking at the text of verses 21 and 22. 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22. The Apostle Paul writes, "But examine everything carefully. Hold fast to that which is good. Abstain from every form of evil."

A couple of months ago I had the opportunity, as you know, to drive across America to deliver my son's car to him. And in the process, we were driving through the back roads of Arkansas and rolling along the gentle road that we happened to be on - just a two-lane road through a kind of a misty rain - we were watching the little farm houses go by along the way, and all of a sudden after we came over one little hill there was a big sign that said, "Quilts." Well, I had, for a number of years, been nosing around looking for a quilt I might buy for my wife, Patricia. And so I thought, "Well, I'll stop there and see what the quilts look like." And so I pulled in to the little dirt area in front of this tiny little house, and I knocked on the door and a little old lady came to the door. And I said, "I was just wondering about your quilts." And she said, "Oh, please come in."

And I walked in, and there were several quilts hanging on some little pieces of wood and draped over them, and off to the left was her husband sitting in a big easy chair with stacks of literature by him and a TV control switch. I don't know that he had moved in decades. And I walked into this kind of musty old house and she - I said, "I'm just kind of interested in quilts." And she said, "Well let me show you one." And she pulled out a quilt that, first of all, had no rhyme or reason. It was a quilt full of bits and scraps of everything imaginable all sewn together. And I said, "No, that's really not what I'm looking for."

And I described the kind of quilt I was looking for which, interestingly enough, she had, and which I bought and my wife now possesses. But as I - I had to go down to a little bank in the town to get some cash to come back and pay. And when I came back and walked in, we noticed that there was a lot of literature everywhere, literature from professors at Dallas Seminary, literature from Jehovah's Witnesses, literature from the Unity Unitarian Fellowship, all kinds of literature, and some video cassettes of varying kind of Charismatic ministries. And by then I knew the husband's name was Johnny, which was an interesting coincidence.

And I said to him, "Johnny," I said, "You have an awful lot of information here." He said, "Well, there's good in all of it." And I realized that not only did his wife make quilts but he had a quilted theology - bits and pieces and scraps of everything all sewn together. That's very typical. Very typical. People reading, listening to television, radio, tapes with little or no discernment, just kind of quilt patching the whole thing together into some amorphous kind of thing that really has little rhyme or reason.

The apostle Paul in this text is saying, "You better examine everything, and you better examine it

carefully, and you better find out what it is good and hold on to it and what is not and let go of it.” That’s one of those components in the basics of spiritual living. Unfortunately, the church today has boundless credulity. Anything and everything is accepted. It seems to me that if any one problem outstrips all the others in the church, it is the utter lack of spiritual discrimination that characterizes Christianity.

Bad decisions, faulty reasoning, superficial understanding, shallow knowledge, widespread ignorance have contributed more anguish to the church throughout her history than all the persecutions combined. Persecutions have taken their toll, but it is the inside chaos and the inside confusion over doctrine that has left the most scars on the church. And this is not only the result of human weakness in discerning truth, but it is the work of Satan who, disguised as an angel of light, wants to confuse us as much as is possible.

As a result most, it seems, today have a patchwork quilt theology that is a mix and match of all kinds of things. Error is not only visible at the basic primitive levels of theology but at the deeper and more complex levels, as well. Now this should not happen because we have been duly warned. Scripture warns us of doctrines of demons, destructive heresies, myths, perverse teachings, commandments of men, speculations, controversial issues, deceitful spirits, worldly fables, false knowledge, empty philosophy, traditions of men, worldly wisdom and it says they are all pitfalls for Christians.

Jesus said that wolves would come in sheep’s clothing. Paul said, “grievous wolves will enter in not sparing the flock.” Paul wrote to Timothy and said, “And as the age goes on, evil men will get worse and worse and deception will increase.” Paul again said, “There will be doctrines of demons that will lead people astray.”

To put it mildly, there is a world of chaos and confusion in the church. No one who understands Scripture and is aware of its warnings about error should ever be so gullible as to say a statement like that man said that day, “Well there’s good in all of it.” We cannot for a moment believe that everyone who claims to be in Christ and to speak on behalf of Christ is speaking the truth. But people seem to be so gullible.

In many cases the church, I think, is like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. In Matthew chapter 16, a couple of verses of interest that you might want to note. Matthew 16:1, “And the Pharisees and Sadducees came up and testing him asked him to show them a sign from heaven. But he answered and said to them, ‘When it is evening, you say it will be fair weather for the sky is red. And in the morning, there will be a storm today for the sky is red and threatening. Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and a sign will not be given it except the sign of Jonah.’ And he left them and went away.”

He said, “Your problem is simple. Your limited, primitive, non-scientific knowledge of how to tell the weather exceeds your spiritual discernment.” What an unbelievable put down. “You don’t know much about the weather, and your way of assessing the weather is very primitive. But as little as you know about weather, you know more about that than you do theology.” They had no ability to distinguish between the false and the true. And Jesus condemned them for it. And in effect said, “I have nothing to offer you.” Distinguishing between truth and error is essential in Christian life. That is why Paul says this in this text.

Now remember, starting with verse 16, Paul has been listing the basics of Christian living: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise Scripture or the revelation of God.” And now he comes to this one. “Examine everything.”

This is a masterful summation of all the components in basic Christian living. We are to have constant joy. We are to be in unceasing prayer. We are to be thankful no matter what happens. We are never to quench the working of the Spirit of God. We are never to look down on the revelation of God, but to exalt it and obey it. And we are to examine everything carefully so that we can discern what is good and what is evil.

Now let me have you look at the text for just a few moments because it’s fairly easy to interpret. “But examine everything,” the Greek text says - “carefully” as you’ll note in the New American Standard is in italics, meaning it was added. The text actually says, “But examine everything.” The word “examine” is *dokimazō*, that’s a familiar word to New Testament students because it is often used to refer to something being tested to reveal its genuineness. It is sometimes used of testing metals.

“Test everything to see that it is genuine,” to distinguish between what is true and false, what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, separate the wheat from the chaff. This process, by the way, to borrow Paul’s words to the Ephesians, is an effort to learn what is pleasing to the Lord, to distinguish. The word could be to judge. Judge everything, evaluate everything, distinguish everything and “everything” means everything, all things. We are to be like King David who was able to discern, says 2 Samuel 14:17, good from evil.

Now once you have discerned that, what does he say? Verse 21, “Hold fast to that which is good.” “Hold fast” means to embrace, to embrace wholeheartedly, to take possession of. The word “good,” that familiar word *kalos* means “what is in itself good, genuine, true,” not just fair to look at, not just lovely and beautiful appearing, but what is inherently genuine, true, noble, right, and good. When you find that, embrace it, hold on to it.

Verse 22 says, “Abstain from every form of evil.” And the word “abstain” is a very strong word. It means to “hold oneself away from.” The preposition *apa* is there. It means to “shun.” And it emphasizes the complete separation of the believer from what is deemed evil in teaching and behavior. When you see something that is evil, not true, false, shun it.

There never is in the Scripture given any latitude for us to expose ourselves to what is not true. We are to shun it. We are to run from it. It emphasizes then the complete separation of the believer from what is deemed evil. Evil here is evil in the active sense, as something malignant, harmful, working injury and disaster to everyone who touches it. It is poisonous, it is deadly. Stay away from it like you would stay away from a plague.

Lenski was correct when he wrote, “The worst forms of wickedness consist of perversions of the truth, spiritual lies, although today many look upon these forms with indifference and regard them rather harmless.” The fact that moral perversions are included is self-evident, these also work to destroy the spiritual life and appear in many forms. Yes, in the word evil is moral perversion. But he’s right, the worst form of it is the perversion of the truth.

Now notice again verse 22. He says, "You are to shun every form." Every form. The word "form" there, it's just a simple word. It means "kind, sort, species, or shape." He is saying, "Evil in any form, evil at any shape, evil of any sort, evil of any kind. Once you have discerned it, shun it." And yes, that encompasses moral conduct, moral perversion. But the heart of what he is saying here has to do with the perversion of truth. This, then, becomes primarily for us a call for discernment. A call for discernment.

This is not something that is unfamiliar to the student of the New Testament. There are other places in the text where such discernment is called for. In fact, many such statements come from the pen of the apostle Paul. He is concerned that we be discerning, that we separate.

Now having just given you that glimpse at the text - and that's enough - I want to launch off this morning, and I'm going to begin what will end up being a couple of weeks series. And I want to talk about this matter of discernment because I'm very concerned about it. There is a great lack of discernment in the church, as I have been saying to you, and it shows up in so many ways.

The undiscerning contemporary church, for example, has often rejected Darwin and Huxley but accepted Freud. Has often rejected doctrine, and favored and embraced relationships, as if they were the priority. Has become fascinated with entertainment and bored with exposition. Has been enamored with feelings and lowered the value of thinking clearly. As a result, evangelical Christianity - listen to this - is fighting for its very life. I'll say that again. Evangelical Christianity, in my view, is fighting for its very life. And our time cries out for people with discernment.

Now the culture around us doesn't help because we live in a very non-discriminating culture. We live in a culture, in fact, that has put a new and unacceptable definition and value on discernment. For example, it can be simply noted that it used to be that when someone was a person of discrimination, that was an indication of their nobility, an indication of their wisdom, an indication that they were to be honored and respected, they were desirable. That was a person of discrimination, one who could discriminate between good and evil, true and false, what is best.

Now a person who discriminates is somebody who is going to get sued by the ACLU. The word has taken on a completely different meaning. It isn't even allowable in our vocabulary. This is a day that will not tolerate absolutes. This is a day that will not tolerate discrimination of any kind. And I'm not talking about racial discrimination, which is intolerable to God, I'm talking about discrimination of any kind. This is not a time that will tolerate convictions. This is not a time that will tolerate dogma.

You're seeing that right now as you read the newspapers about Bob Vernon, one of our elders, who is Assistant Chief of Police in Los Angeles. It is intolerable to this culture that this man believes the Bible, which affirms the submission of women, the sin of homosexuality, and the need to spank your children. That is intolerable in this culture along with, for all intents and purposes, any other view, because it's a time when you don't discriminate about anything. And so the church is living in a milieu of non-discriminating kind of thought. And we find that that only accelerates our own problem. The church cannot fall prey to the spirit of this age.

Now I want to answer three questions in this series about this matter of discernment, and this morning I'm going to begin with question number one. Question number one is why is there such a

lack of discernment? I just told you the culture is in to that, but why is there such a lack of discernment in the church? Why? And I'm going to try to give you some answers. It's not going to be like a normal sermon because I'm going to be talking in some theological terms and assessing the scenario as I see it in the church. So listen carefully.

There are, I believe, some identifiable causes as to why there is such a terrible lack of discernment in the church today. The main one I'll give you first, the weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction. The weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction. That's number one.

There were much better times in the history of the church when Christians were encouraged to think biblically, to think theologically, to test everything, to search the Scriptures thoroughly, to distinguish carefully its truths. And when discovering what was true, to take a stand and be immovable. Today, those who take firm stands on biblical doctrine are very frequently criticized for splitting hairs and being unloving because the norm today is to gaze lazily at the surface of scriptural truth and then even justify such cavalier shallowness as the desirable generosity of spirit toward those who differ. This is rampant in the church. You sort of just scan Scripture and you don't want to be too dogmatic because if you're dogmatic that's unloving to someone else who has a different opinion. And after all, we certainly don't want to split hairs.

Jay Adams writes, "Nowhere is this tendency more apparent than in Christian counseling." He also writes, "Self-styled experts in psychology, sociology and education who hold Ph.D.s in their fields and Sunday school degrees in Bible pontificate on Christian teaching and life setting themselves up as spokesmen for God."

What he is basically saying is that the matter of biblical interpretation has been invaded by people who are ill equipped to do that work. There is a lack of discernment, however, not only in the arena of counseling, but there is a lack of doctrine and conviction in the ministry in general, it seems to me. Sharing has replaced preaching.

The other day I was doing a radio interview and a fellow called and he said, "I've been listening to you for a while, and I just want you to know you're a lot nicer person on the radio today than I thought you were by listening to your sermons." Well, when I preach my sermons, I don't think I say things that aren't nice because if I did they would edit them out before the thing ever got on the radio. And I don't know how he could find out whether I was a nicer person by just listening to me.

But what he was really saying was I was in a conversation with a lady and there was a great measure of disagreement and I was trying to be gracious as I could and gentle and not strive in handling that situation, and it was much more tolerable to see that than it was to listen to someone articulate with conviction doctrine. And it was much easier for him to handle me having a conversation gently with someone who disagreed than to preach doctrine. That's the mood of our time.

As I said, there is a cultural wave behind this. It is not an accident that the church, in the name of unity, love and relationships, has moved away from clarity, and conviction, and doctrine, and has begun to favor openness, rejecting narrowness and dogmatism. This has been the prevailing climate in the culture around us. In fact, there's a war on standards. The war on standards is wholesale, isn't it? I mean, if you had a conviction about something it would have to be utterly arbitrary because there

isn't any standard.

There's been so much antagonism against convictions, just in general in our culture. I don't know if you realize it, but everything is up for grabs. I'm talking about history. Revisionist history has now questioned everything that historians have believed. Science, even in the field of science they're questioning things that for years have been believed. All beliefs have become only relatively true and only relatively valuable, whether you're talking about sociology, psychology, philosophy, economics, education or whatever you're talking about.

And, of course, to the world, religion is the most subjective of all because they believe it's just some personalized experience, not a divine revelation. And so the culture is becoming more and more relativistic and the church is catching the disease.

This trend was visible, by the way, in the church years ago. Last Sunday when I was home with this neck problem and couldn't be with you, I finished reading Volume II of Martyn Lloyd-Jones' biography. I enjoyed every moment of it and commend all 777 pages to you. But as I was reading the last section of that book, it was interesting for him to say the things that were directly related to this very issue of discernment that were recorded there. He saw the trend coming, the trend of relativism in the church and the death of doctrinal clarity back in 1971, twenty years ago.

And this is what he said. "There's a very obvious reaction at the present time against intellectualism. This is found among the students in America and increasingly in this country. Reason is being distrusted and set on one side. Following D.H. Lawrence, many are saying that our troubles are due to the fact that we have overdeveloped our cerebrum. We must listen more to our blood and go back to nature.

"And so turning against intellectualism and deliberately espousing the creed of irrationality, they yield themselves to the desire for experience and place sensation above understanding. What matters is feeling and enjoyment, not thought. Pure thought leads nowhere."

Twenty years ago Martyn Lloyd-Jones saw the movement of relativism coming into the church. Instead of seeing the danger of the trend, and heeding his words, evangelicals accommodated themselves to the trend as if it was some kind of boon to their cause. And in England, a man rose to prominence by the name of David Watson and he led the charge of relativism into the Church of England. This is what he said.

"The reason I - " here's one quote from him. "The reason I travel with a team gifted as they are in the performing arts is that they are able to communicate the gospel much more effectively than I could with mere words." That is an astounding statement. That is an abandonment of the biblical pattern for the proclamation of the truth through words. And it was reflective of the mood of the time.

David Watson then became the partner of John Wimber and the Vineyard Movement - which we'll say a lot more about in a few weeks - in which doctrine is not even an issue. In fact, John Wimber has said, "We are in the process of cataloging our experience so we can come up with a theology." Pure experience. David Watson says "I don't want to preach because the truth can be better communicated through the performing arts." May I remind somebody that Jesus was not a singer, he was a preacher? And John the Baptist was not a singer, he was a preacher. And the apostles were

not actors, they were preachers.

David Watson went on to criticize the Christian church for concentrating exclusively on the mind. This is what Watson said, "Most churches rely heavily on the spoken or written Word and then wonder why so few people find the Christian faith to be relevant." He is saying the written Word and the spoken Word make the Christian faith irrelevant. Irrelevant Christianity is not mental. Irrelevant Christianity is not rational. It is not doctrinal. It is emotional. It is experiential. It is mystical.

This movement has come like a flood. The emphasis in the church has gone from preaching doctrine to the mind to give people a greater knowledge of divine truth, to doing little more than inducing feelings, inducing emotions, focusing on needs. Coupling that relativistic approach with the Charismatic Movement and with those psychologists who come in to the church with their relational stuff, and preaching becomes mystical, relational and relativistic. Worship began to descend.

And you can see it in many ways. Just see it in the music, would be one way. Worship began to descend from singing great truths about God, lyric-centered music, to music where sound, rhythm and harmony dominate to induce warm and fuzzy feelings. Music style moved from that which was classically accompanying the hymns, the great lyrics, to sounds that are more similar and familiar to the pop music world.

If I can kind of give you a perspective on all of this, I'm sure Satan knew we Christian evangelicals would not buy the theology of liberalism so he sold us the hermeneutics. What do you mean by that? Satan knew we wouldn't buy their theology so he sold us their principles of interpretation, so sooner or later we would arrive at their theology: A kind of Christianity where doctrine and conviction are scorned.

You go into the typical town, find the pulpit where the man of God clearly and deeply and profoundly and faithfully articulates doctrine, and I'll show you a small group of faithful folk. You find the church where they're hooping and hollering, diving, dancing, and jumping and I'll show you a major crowd, in most cases.

God's Word will never pass away, but sadly it has been bypassed to allow for the new evangelical relativism. Preachers are comedians, story tellers and counselors, but not powerful theological heralds and proclaimers of divine truth.

In fact, this is so serious it's gotten to the place where even at the basic issue of the gospel there's no conviction. In a book called *Power Evangelism* by John Wimber - and I mention him because he's so popular around the world - in that book called *Power Evangelism*, in which he instructs the church on how to evangelize, there is no discussion of the gospel. It isn't in the book.

The gospel isn't in the book, yet they give accounts of people getting saved and becoming Christians on the basis of supposed miracles they saw with no gospel preached to them. Peter Wagner says - professor over at Fuller Seminary - that Argentine evangelist Omar Cabrera has people saved before he starts preaching. They're not concerned with doctrine, apparently.

I remember speaking at the Full Gospel Businessmen's Committee luncheon, which was one of the most novel experiences of my life. That's a Charismatic group. And somebody in the group had

mistakenly thought that I had received the baptism of the Spirit and spoken in tongues. And so they invited me to come and give my testimony about tongues.

What they didn't realize was that, of course, I had not received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and spoken in tongues, and I thought they wanted me to come and simply give the biblical view because they were interested in hearing what we believe. So I went in there. They were already to hear this great testimony about how I got transformed into being a Charismatic, and I was assuming they wanted the straight stuff out of the Word of God on the truth, and so I started to preach.

It was the only time in my life that I was actually literally physically pulled out of the pulpit bodily. After about 20 minutes, the man grabbed my coat and pulled me down. We went - and then got in the pulpit and began to say, "We have to pray. Let's pray." And he prayed that some time in the middle of the night God would zap me and I would burst forth in tongues. And he tried to apologize to the crowd. And this went on for awhile.

After it was over - I'll never forget - a man came up to me afterwards and he said, "Well, that was very interesting." And he carried on this little conversation, and it was a pretty volatile moment. By the way, I went back again. I said I wasn't finished. I do need to finish a few things. And I said some more things. But it shook them to the core, believe me.

But afterwards this man said to me, I said, "You know what? My concern is that people who are just into this experiential thing aren't even Christians." This is what the man said. He said, "Well, I've been in this nine years, in this group." And he said, "This is what I believe. I believe there's this big long staircase, and you get to the top of the stairs someday, and you knock on the door, and this guy named Jesus comes and you just hope he lets you in." Nine years and doesn't understand the gospel. Nine years and has no sense of clarity about doctrine.

The other day I was doing a radio interview - a two-hour interview - and the host of the program said to me - this is on a Christian station - the host of the program said to me, "Well, how does a person become a Christian?" I said, "First of all, to recognize your sinfulness, it is necessary to recognize that I am a sinner, and to be willing to turn and repent from my sin, and then to recognize that I cannot save myself, that I have no resources within me to redeem myself, and cast myself on the mercy of God, and to believe in Jesus Christ as God's Son who came into the world, and died, and paid the price for my sin and rose again for my justification."

The host said, "You don't believe that everyone who gets saved has to believe all that, do you?" I said, "Yes. Yes." That host said to me, "I certainly didn't deal with any of my sins when I got saved." I said, "How did you get saved?" This was the reply, "I was in drugs, alcohol, living with my boyfriend in Science of Mind for six years, and one day I just got Jesus' phone number." I said, "You just got Jesus' phone number?" "I just got Jesus' phone number and I just knew where he was."

What in the world are these people experiencing? When you don't even lay down clear doctrine at the level of the gospel, where you going to go from there? And the cry is, as one man said to me when my book on *The Gospel According to Jesus* came out, he said, "Your book is divisive. Your book is divisive." You want to know something? He's right. He's right. Want to know something else? Doctrine divides.

People say, "Oh doctrine divides. Doctrine divides." I say, "Amen. Preach it. Doctrine divides." You know what it does? It confronts error. It separates true from false. It makes judgments. Today's climate, however, of unity in the priority of relationships, that's not tolerable.

You know, I believe that when evangelicals are willing to depreciate doctrine, and when they're willing to set aside unpopular convictions, and when they're willing to stay silent on biblical teaching that offends people in error and sin, opposition will disappear and we could all get together. I believe that.

I could start a unity movement. Eliminate doctrine, set aside unpopular convictions, don't say anything that offends, and we'll all get together. That isn't any surprise. But you know, some other things are going to disappear too along with doctrine, like truth, conviction, discernment, righteousness, holiness, discipline, true love and spiritual maturity. They're all gone, too, and then God will disappear, Ichabod. That price is too high. That will produce a church victimized by hell's deceptions.

What do you think Paul had in mind when he said, "Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth?" It is a shame not to rightly divide the truth from error.

So the main contributor to this lack of discernment has been the weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction in the name of unity, in the name of mystical experience, and so forth. And as I said, the liberals couldn't sell us their theology, and so they sold us their hermeneutics: Relationships, love, unity, mystical experience. And we buy in to that and we'll end up with the same chaos. Everybody talking about heaven ain't going there. And everybody talking about Jesus: Charismatics, neo-orthodox, Roman Catholics and everybody else, don't necessarily know him.

There's a second contributor - and I at least have to get two of these this morning. And this builds on it. And I want you to follow this. I don't want to get too philosophical for you here. The second is this. A failure to be antithetical. A failure to be antithetical. You say, "What do you mean by that?" I mean to be black and white.

In debate, in argument, in theology, we talk about thesis and antithesis. A thesis is some truth that's laid down or some idea that's laid down, or some concept that's laid down, and here is the opposing concept. Black and white, thesis, antithesis. We have to think antithetically. We live in a culture that, some say, thinks on what you could call a continuum. In other words, there's no black/white. There's no right/wrong, true/false, good/bad. There's just this long continuum of relative shades of gray. And everybody sort of is on their on there somewhere. Religion is subjective, spiritual experience is subjective.

But listen, biblical preaching is not relative. It is not subjective. It is absolute. It is sharply black and white. It is pointedly antithetical to error. And I'm not trying to defend myself, I'm just dealing with the text here. But I tell you, the criticism that comes back to me all the time is, "You are so strong on doctrine." I don't know what else to be, because that is the nature of truth. The truth divides and sets itself against error.

We must think antithetically. You hear a thesis, and you must look at an antithesis, the opposite and

test it. And it's absolute. Truth is absolute. Therefore it rubs people the wrong way. It hits them with conviction.

Since worldly thinking pollutes the minds of most church goers, and worldly thinking is this big gray area: Nothing is really black and white, nothing is really right and wrong. I was listening the other day to a guy, driving in the car, to Barbara De Angelis on talk radio. And this lady was calling in and she was telling about a relationship she was having with a man whom she wasn't married to and she was living in and she - and this counselor said, "Well, it's got to be right for you. It's got to be right for you. There's really nothing that's right or wrong. It just has to be right for you." That's the continuum. And that's the kind of stuff that we're continually being sold.

So we have a culture growing up with continuum kind of thinking, that things are not black and white, they're just different shades of gray. Black and white preaching, teaching from Scripture, is seen as offensive and fanatical. But in the Bible, antithesis is crucial, discernment is essential. And the Bible just lays things down black and white.

I mean, just follow this thought. From the Garden of Eden with its two trees - one allowed and one forbidden - to the eternal destiny of the human being - in heaven or hell - the Bible sets forth two and only two ways: God's way and all other ways. People are said to be saved or lost. They belong to God's people or Satan's people. There is the mount of blessing and the mount of cursing. There is the narrow way and the broad way. There is eternal life and eternal destruction. There are those who are against us and those who are with us. There are those within the kingdom, those without the kingdom.

There is life and death, truth and falsehood, good and bad, light and darkness, kingdom of God, kingdom of Satan, love, hatred, spiritual wisdom, wisdom of the world. Christ is said to be the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by him. He is the only name under the sky by which one may be saved. Everything in Scripture is absolute. It is basic to divine revelation.

Jay Adams, who is a very well-known preacher and seminary professor, writes what I think is an excellent section in one of his books. Listen to this. "Not only will you find such antithetical teaching and much more on nearly every page of the Bible, but even the construction of the Hebrew language itself seems designed to teach antithesis. Much scriptural poetry, many proverbs and even some narrative is antithetical in structure. Perhaps you have wondered about the principle underlying the clean and unclean distinctions of the Old Testament." This is very interesting. "Various relationships or rationales have been given for some of these distinctions, yet many seem to be purely arbitrary." You know, why clean and unclean animals? And all of that in the laws that God gave Israel, this is what he suggests.

"May I suggest that all problems of arbitrariness are resolved when you see the clean/unclean system as a means of alerting the Jew to the fact that all day long every day, in whatever he does, he must consciously choose God's way. Choices about food, clothing, farming techniques, justice, health care, holidays, and methods of worship were made either God's way or some other way. In other words, the clean/unclean system was designed to develop in God's people an antithetical mentality. Forbidding the mixing of materials in clothing, for example, doesn't seem to arbitrary, after all, when considered in the light of the biblical concern to create a antithetical posture toward life.

“But with pastors and people alike growing up in an environment that stresses continual thinking, antithesis is dulled as more and more people attempt to integrate sociology, psychology, business management principles with the Scripture. Teachers in Christian colleges now consider it one of the key tasks of Christian higher education to seek to integrate the professor’s faith with his learning. The key task, you see, is no longer to distinguish God’s ways from others, but to find places of agreement.” That’s a dangerous thing.

The psalmist, listen to this, Psalm 1. “How blessed is the man who doesn’t walk in the council of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and in his law he meditates day and night.” There’s a clear line drawn. They’re over here. We’re over here.

But this kind of continuum thinking has contributed to the climate where discernment is unnecessary, unthinkable, and to pursue it is foolish, to pursue it is divisive - are you ready for this? - to pursue it is evil. You’re an evil person if you draw lines. You’re an evil person if you think in absolutes. You’re an evil person if you have convictions. Discernment can only thrive in an environment of doctrinal absolutes.

Listen to Titus 1:9. “Holding fast - ” there’s that same term about holding to what is good. “Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, - ” the doctrine, holding fast your doctrine “ - so that you can exhort with sound doctrine and refute those who contradict.” We’re in the refutation business, as well as the affirmation business. When elders were to be selected, they were to have the ability to refute error.

So, the second cause, I think, is this failure to be antithetical, this rejection of absolutes, which ties into the first one. Let me give you a third, and we’ll probably stop with this one. This is very important. Another contributor to this lack of discernment - and I’m going to follow this through, and when we’re done I’m going to teach you how to be a discerning person. The third one - the third cause in this lack of discernment - is a preoccupation - listen carefully - a preoccupation with image and influence as the key to evangelization. A preoccupation with image and influence as the key to evangelization.

In other words, you hear this all the time, that if we are going to win the world, we have to win their favor. The church has got to become a beloved agency. They’ve got to like us. So we don’t want to fight for truth. We don’t want to be too doctrinal. We don’t want to offend anybody, because image and influence is the key to evangelization.

I recently saw a brand new book in a bookstore, in fact this week, called *User Friendly Churches*. Big selling book. Now what we’re supposed to do is market ourselves so that we become a friendly place. Well, we certainly want to be loving and gracious, but one sermon would convince most people that we’re not all about just being friendly. We’re all about preaching truth.

The man who once took his stand for truth and preached it is now asked to take his seat. He’s a problem. We don’t fight for truth. We don’t boldly proclaim truth, because we’re afraid we might offend an unbeliever. And after all, if anybody is going to get evangelized, it’s going to be because they find us a friendly place, a nice place. We want to be popular with the world because we believe that’s the key to evangelization. Imagine that. We are in to this whole deal that the image of the church and its non-threatening structure is the key to evangelization. This kind of movement believes

that the church will offend unbelievers if it preaches sin, or hell, or repentance, or the cross, and it will lose its prestige. So the new trend is for the church to build an image of love, and care, and being very nice, and make everybody comfortable, and make everybody happy, and entertain the unbeliever, and make sure they're never offended, and make sure they are very, very comfortable. And the bottom line is if they like us, they'll like Jesus. That's the bottom line.

Influence and image is much more important than Scripture. I don't believe the church gathers for any other reason than to be edified. We come together to worship God as believers and for you to be edified. And we scatter to evangelize. We go out to evangelize. And you want to be as loving, and kind, and gracious, as you can be in presenting the truth, but you don't mitigate the truth because you believe influence and image is going to evangelize anybody.

This kind of trend, by the way, beloved - and I'm going to be pretty pointed in a minute - has been coming for a long time. A long time. I remember hearing about the Billy Graham Crusade in the city of New York. And there was a tremendous cry among evangelicals across this country that something new had happened, because for the first time in evangelistic history in America, liberals - people who were not evangelical fundamental Christians - were invited to cooperate in that meeting in 1955. An ecumenical evangelism was born, that is, the kind of evangelism that says, "We want everybody to come. So we'll get the Catholics, and we'll get the liberals, and we'll get the neo-orthodox, and the people who don't believe the Bible, and we'll get them all together, and we'll get them all involved."

Carl Henry, who has been a tremendous contributor to assessing the church, says, "If you look at the early years of the Billy Graham organization, you will find that its overall policy was to attain prestige and influence for evangelicals. To do this, there had to be a successful image and that would not be possible, they believed, unless every effort was made to avoid any division with those who didn't believe the Bible."

That was a new day - 1955, brand new day. "The Graham organization," wrote Henry, "was not ready to forfeit dialogue with the ecumenical leaders and churches because it feared a loss of influence." That showed up in Fuller Seminary. Edward John Carnell who was on the faculty at Fuller said, "We - " And I'm quoting him, "We need prestige desperately." And they went after it.

And they wanted faculty members who got their degrees from the elite eastern liberal institutions. I remember one faculty member saying in a meeting when I was over there at Fuller Seminary, "If I have to publicly and outwardly identify with evangelicals, forget it." They desperately wanted the prestige. They desperately wanted the association with the influential eastern elite, and even the dead Germans who spawned liberalism.

And when the church began to say, "We're going to have to have influence. And we're going to have to have prestige. And we're going to have to have popularity. We're going to have to be intellectually accepted. And we're going to have to embrace these people and show that we really like them. And they're going to have to like us a lot if they're ever going to like our Jesus," it made a major turn. A major turn.

Paul the Apostle said, "We are the scum. We are the dregs. We are the off-scouring of the world." Jesus said, "They hated me. They'll hate you." But we've gotten sophisticated. This view believes

that our prestige, our influence, and our popularity is what gets people to the place where they'll believe the gospel. How absolutely wrong that is. How absolutely wrong.

Real spiritual men fight, and real spiritual men pay the price for bold, clear, loving proclamation of the truth. What I'm seeing happen I could call the feminization of the church. So soft.

Returning to Martyn Lloyd-Jones' biography for a moment and thinking about it, I spent a day with his family last summer, Patricia and I did. His grandson, Christopher Catherwood has written much about him that is very helpful to me. One perspective of this godliest of men was the sad fact that he was perceived in a negative way. It's amazing in the light of his life. J.I. Packer said he was the godliest man he ever met. But he was perceived in a negative way, even though he was a virtuous man.

And the reason he was perceived negatively was because he was so theological, he was so antithetical, and he believed that evangelization occurred under the powerful preaching of the truth, not by establishing prestige and image. And I want to share an excerpt from the book, again, that talks about this issue.

Christopher Catherwood wrote, "As years went by, Martyn Lloyd-Jones acquired an unfortunate negative image in the eyes of many. The explanation of this is bound to be one of the main areas of controversy in any interpretation of his life. In his own mind, the issue came down to differing attitudes to Scripture. He saw that the elements of warning and of opposition to error were essential parts of any true commitment to the Bible, and therefore believed that the disapproval of polemics, debate, in the Christian church is a very serious matter.

"Accordingly, he expected no approval from those who accepted the prevailing attitude which put love first, and treated arguments over doctrine as unchristian. It was that very attitude he believed which was responsible for the removal of the note of authority from the pulpit. The charge of dogmatism and the dislike of reproof and correction were criticisms of Scripture itself.

"One of the main characteristics of Martyn Lloyd-Jones' ministry was thus both an offense to those who were supporters of the spirit of the modern pulpit, and an inspiration to those who believed that a return to authority in preaching was a great need. The latter were profoundly thankful for the very thing which the first group had found faulty.

"Dr. Lloyd-Jones - "listen to this" - had a penetrating and courageous diagnosis of the present situation. This is an age of appeasement - not in the political and international sense - but in the realm of Christian affairs and of the church. Winston Churchill is now acclaimed and almost idolized. In the thirties he was severely criticized as an impossible person because he knew what he believed, he believed it, and he caused disturbance by criticizing the policy of appeasement. So it is today. Strong men who stand by their principles are today regarded as being difficult, self-assertive and non-cooperative."

How is it that the church can ever come to the point where it succumbs to that? Where it believes that influence, prestige and image are more effective - more effective - in fulfilling the calling to preach the gospel than the preaching of God's truth? I tell you, it shocks me to find how there's an increasing number of people who believe that faithfulness to the church by the Word of God - in other

words, building the church according to Scripture - it seems to me there's an increasing number of people who don't see that as an issue.

That's not how to get the job done. They don't believe anymore that if you're faithful to the truth, the Holy Spirit will bless you, and honor you, however small and despised your work might be. You've got to become marketed in an image that is acceptable. Beloved, we're an offense, we know that. We are an offense. We are an offense. Every time we get in the newspapers again, I'm reminded, we are an offense.

We're a lot more offensive than they know. They're just not around here enough. If they came every week, they could write an article on how offensive we are. We are an offense to all in error. We are an offense to all in rejection of the truth. We are an offense to all those who refuse Jesus Christ. We are an offense to all those who live in sin. And to mitigate that offense is ridiculous, because it is precisely what the Holy Spirit is intending to produce. He wants to convict, because conviction and confrontation in conviction leads to salvation. Those offended should be offended.

Well, we have a lack of discernment in the church in spite of what Paul told us in this text because of our weak theology, our failure to be antithetical, and a preoccupation with the worldly image. This is how it is out there, and you can thank the Lord that God by his Spirit and his grace alone has led this church down a path where we want to have a strong theology. We want to be antithetical, and be black and white, and absolute about truth, and we're not preoccupied with our worldly image, not at all. We're preoccupied with speaking the truth in love. We'll be as gracious and loving and gentle as we can be, but we will not mitigate on the message.

Well, I have a few more for next time. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we hear the simple, straight-forward words of Paul. "But examine everything." Everything. "Hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil." Lord, make us discerning people. We want always to speak the truth in love. We want to have the gentleness and compassion of Christ. But we must speak the truth. We must have convictions, clear theology. We must be antithetical to error and sin. And we must never believe that the church's power is in its image rather than in its message.

We must never believe that we could accomplish with the performing arts what can only be accomplished with the spoken, proclaimed, and written Word. Father, help us to be discerning, and if in a fog, indeed, to look back and see the causes of that fog, and ask that Your Spirit would give us the capability to make choices, that we might choose what is true and right, that we know your blessing and give you glory. These things we ask humbly in Christ's name. Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2017 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).

