

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages	Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Romans 12:1-3	Gary L. W. Johnson
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APOSTOLIC IMPERATIVE (Part 4)

When you hear someone say things like “doctrine divides but love unites,” a red flag should go up. We do well to be concerned over doctrinal apathy within evangelicalism. This general indefiniteness in doctrinal construction is coming upon us like a flood. The outlines of doctrinal statements are becoming more and more blurred in the hands of our more recent guides. We are hearing more and more frequently sharp complaints of the “intellectualism” that is assumed to be inherent in any clear conception of doctrinal truth. But if we read our Bibles thoughtfully, we will come to the same opinion as Paul in Galatians: that it is not a matter of small importance whether we preserve the purity of the gospel. If the history of the church teaches us anything, it is that a corrupt form of Christianity itself menaces, from time to time, the life of healthy Christianity. We are sadly experiencing, on a rather large scale, a subjectivism that betrays its weakened hold on the objective truth and reality of Christianity by its neglect or even renunciation of its distinctive objective character. Nowadays men cheerfully abandon the whole substance of Christianity, but they will hardly be persuaded to surrender the name. They really wish to have a creedless Christianity. “Creeds,” they shout, “are divisive things; away with them!” If there must be such things, at least let us prune all their distinctive features away and give ourselves a genial and unpolemic Christianity, one in which all the stress is laid on life, not dogma. Where does this leave us? An *undogmatic* Christianity is no Christianity at all. We are often told that “Christianity is a person, not a doctrine.” How true! Christianity is a person; but on pain of reducing it to magic, which would no longer possess any ethical and, consequently, any religious quality, we must grant that Christianity, precisely because it is *essentially* a person, is also a body of facts and ideas. When the apostle Paul declared, “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and *Him crucified*” (1 Cor. 2:2; italics added), he was defining a special doctrine of Jesus as the essence of Christianity. John MacArthur recently wrote: “With increasing frequency nowadays, I hear people say things like, *Come, now, let’s not bicker about what we believe. It’s only doctrine. Let’s focus instead on how we live. The way of Jesus is surely more important than our arguments over the words of Jesus. Let’s set aside our disagreements over creeds and dogmas and devote ourselves instead to showing the love of Christ by the way we conduct our lives.* Many people these days evidently find that suggestion appealing. On the face of it, it may sound generous, kind-hearted, modest, and altruistic. But the view itself is a serious violation of *the way of Jesus*, who taught that salvation hinges on hearing and believing His *Word* (John 5:24). He said, *The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life* (John 6:63). To those who doubted His truth-claims, He said, *If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins* (John 8:24). He never left any room for someone to imagine that the propositional content of His teaching is optional as long as we mimic His behavior.”¹ In Romans 12:1-3, the apostle lays a lot of stress on our need to have our minds *transformed* (as opposed to being *conformed* in order to discern God’s will).

Hendriksen helpfully writes: “It is important to pay close attention to the exact manner in which the apostle expresses himself in this exhortation. Note the following details.

- a. He uses *the present tense*: ‘Continue to let yourselves be transformed.’ Accordingly, this transformation must not be a matter of impulse: on again, off again. It must be continuous.
- b. The verb used is in *the passive voice*. Paul does not say, ‘Transform yourselves,’ but ‘Let yourselves be transformed.’ Transformation is basically the work of the Holy Spirit. It amounts to progressive sanctification. *And we all, with unveiled faces, reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit* (2 Cor. 3:18).
- c. Nevertheless, the verb is in *the imperative mood*. Believers are not completely passive. Their responsibility is not canceled. They must allow the Spirit to do his work within their hearts and lives. Their duty is to cooperate to the full. See Phil. 2:12, 13; 2 Thess. 2:13.

“Finally, the apostle describes the glorious result of this continuous transformation: *so that you may prove what is the will of God* . . . This is a very significant statement. It shows that in order to discern the will of God for their lives believers cannot just depend on their conscience. Conscience is indeed very important, but it must constantly be sent back to the school of Scripture to receive instruction from the Holy Spirit. It is in this manner that believers become and remain aware of God’s will. Which will? Decretive or Preceptive? The latter, of course. See Deut. 29:29. In this way the will of God will become an increasingly well-established or proven component of the consciousness and lives of God’s children. The more they live in accordance with that will and approve of it, the more also, through this experience, will they learn to know that will, and rejoice in that knowledge. They will exclaim, *Thy will is our delight*. And what is the contents of that preceptive will? In other words, what is it that God wants us to be and to do? The answer is: *that which is good and well-pleasing and perfect*.”²

The leaps and bounds of technology in the past ten years are unprecedented. The massive amount of information available to us today has an upside as well as a downside. Error can be spread just as easily as truth. Theological heresy can be packaged and disseminated today in a way that makes it even more attractive than ever. The danger of deception is greater than it has ever been. Here are some of the key New Testament passages that deal with the deceptive appearance and words of false teachers.

Matthew 7:15-16 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.”

Matthew 24:4-5 “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, *I am the Christ*, and they will lead you astray.”

Romans 16:17-18 “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.”

2 Corinthians 11:3-4 “But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims

another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.”

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.”

Galatians 1:6-7 “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.”

Ephesians 4:14 “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and from by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”

Colossians 2:4 “I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.”

Colossians 2:8 “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way.”

1 Thessalonians 2:9-12 “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false. In order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

1 Timothy 4:1-2 “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.”

1 Timothy 6:20-21 “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called *knowledge*, for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.”

2 Timothy 3:12-13 “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”

2 Peter 2:1-3 “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words.”

1 John 4:1 “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

2 John 7 “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.”

I. REASONS PEOPLE EMBRACE ERRORS.

- A. Inheritance.** This is what they have been taught as the truth, and they have received it from people they respect, trust and love. Having an inheritance is a blessing or a curse depending on what we inherit. Timothy inherited sound teaching and living examples of godliness (2 Timothy 3:10-13), nevertheless, Paul still directs him to the more sure and solid foundation of sacred Scripture (3:14-17). Some people inherit serious theological errors (e.g., they are raised to believe that Christ was no more than a man).
- B. Ignorance.** They don't know any better. This is what they have been taught, and they haven't had anything that has challenged their initial assumptions and convictions. They are not really aware of any alternatives.
- C. Prejudice.** They are aware of other viewpoints that would make them question their assumptions, but foster prejudice against them, or have been taught to foster prejudices against them. This can be divided into two categories:
- (1) *Prejudice due to misinformation.* Examples of this would be the accusation that amillennialists have a faulty hermeneutic borrowed from liberals or Roman Catholics, that they don't take the Bible literally. This kind of prejudice can be exacerbated by misrepresenting the views of your opponents, or choosing their worst representatives rather than their best. In this way you can, without sufficient warrant, dismiss anyone who holds to that view (e.g., all Calvinists are against missions and evangelism). Prejudice is always difficult to overcome, whether it has been created by caricatures or by people whose behaviour has been inconsistent with their profession (and doesn't that describe all of us), i.e., I met an inerrantist once and they were narrow-minded and bigoted (they would probably be narrow-minded and bigoted if they denied inerrancy and believed that the Bible was shot through with error).
 - (2) *Prejudice due to a refusal to accept the truth.* Instead of being prejudiced against a position that has been caricatured, or prejudiced because of bad experiences with people, this kind of prejudice is against a position. It is more than intellectual, it is deeper seated than that. It is the kind of prejudice displayed by John Wesley against the Calvinistic view of predestination. Wesley was bold enough to say that whatever the locus of authority has switched from Scripture to the individual (e.g., I won't believe in a God who sends people to hell forever).
- D. Dissatisfaction.** Specifically dissatisfaction with the truth. This is a little different to the last point. Again, let me subdivide it:
- (1) *Dissatisfaction due to a love of novelty.* Some people identify with a position, a label, a group, but never seem to get their roots down into the truth. They are, perhaps, caught up with the moment, riding on the crest of a wave (e.g., cool culture affirming new Calvinism) but not anchored personally in the truth. Their interest is a phase, and then they move on to something new and have a testimony about how they too were once a Calvinist. Some people are restless spirits. Imagining that they really did hold to a position they can wax eloquent about its deficiencies.

- (2) *Dissatisfaction due to the limits of revelation.* God has given us all that we need to know about his works and ways in his Word. That Word binds our thoughts and sets the limits of our investigations. But the issue is not only eschatological, it is also about the limits placed upon us as creatures. What we know is sufficient, but even what we know we cannot fully fathom or work out (Romans 11:33-36). We may then seek to resolve things that cannot be resolved, to rationalize beyond the limits set by revelation, to draw inferences that are not warranted. This is part of the attraction of heretical solutions. They seek to make their teachings palatable and easily understood at the expense of what is oftentimes complex, i.e., the doctrine of the Trinity.
- (3) *Dissatisfaction due to being unregenerate.* Quite simply, the person without the Spirit will not receive the things of the Spirit, they are foolishness to him (1 Corinthians 2:14). Paul's castigation of the false teachers on Crete included a devastating assessment of their spiritual state (Titus 1:15-16). We expect this of people who are agnostic or atheists, we ought to expect it from those who are Christianized but not really converted.³

CONCLUSION: The Reformers spoke of the *clarity of Scripture* (*perspicuitas scripturae* – perspicuity refers to clarity of thought. This is called one of the traditional attributes of Scripture.). By this the Reformers meant that the essential content of the Bible is clear enough to be understood easily. Biblical Christianity, therefore, is not an esoteric religion. The Bible is not a book that requires some sort of mystic insight or special intellectual powers or pneumatic gift in order to understand its basic message. “The Bible,” writes R. C. Sproul, “speaks of God in meaningful patterns of speech. Some of those patterns may be more difficult than others, but they are not meant to be nonsense statements that only a guru can fathom.”⁴ There are, however, *two* senses in which the word *understand* can be used in reference to the Scriptures: (1) We can *know* something of the meaning of the texts of Scripture without (2) having an understanding of the message. Note the words of John Owen: “There is an especial work of the Spirit of God on the minds of men, communicating spiritual wisdom, light, and understanding unto them, necessary unto their discerning and apprehending aright the mind of God in His word, and the understanding of the mysteries of heavenly truth contained therein. And I shall add hereunto, that among all the false and foolish imaginations that ever the Christian religion was attacked or disturbed withal, there never was any, there is none more pernicious than this, that the mysteries of the gospel are so exposed unto the common reason and understanding of men as that they may know them and comprehend them in a *useful manner*, and *according to their duty*, without the effectual aid and assistance of the Spirit of God.”⁵ The Psalmist in 119:34 prays for this assistance in order to understand. Why did he want understanding? In order that he might know and do the will of God. How often the question is asked, “How can I know the will of God for my life?” This was the Psalmist’s concern. “The only fear of his heart,” remarks G. Campbell Morgan, “is that he may not understand the revelation. This fear drives him to prayer that he may understand.”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ J. MacArthur, *Truth War* (Crossway, 2007), p. 32.

² Wm. Hendriksen, *Romans: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1984), p. 406.

³ This analysis is taken from Martin Downer, *Risking the Truth: Handline Error in the Church* (Focus Books, 2001). I contributed “Raising The Foundation,” chapter 14.

⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Intervarsity Press, 1977), p. 17. This is an excellent little book that I highly recommend for helping people in their personal Bible study.

⁵ John Owen, *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God As Revealed in His Word, with Assurance Therein: and a Declaration of the Perspicuity of the Scriptures with the External Means of the Interpretation of Them. Works IV* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), pp. 124-125.

⁶ G. Campbell-Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Revell, 1917), p. 229.