

THE NECESSITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING DOCTRINE

Titus 1:9-16

INTRODUCTION

This next Tuesday through Thursday Erick Walter, Scott Martin and I will be in St. Louis at the EFCA National Conference. The main reason we are going to this conference is that we are going to take part in an historic discussion and vote. After a two year process the EFCA is voting this week on whether or not to change our statement of faith. A statement of faith for any collection of local churches is the expression, in summary form, of what that collection of churches agrees are the essential doctrines taught by the Bible and which every member and every member church must accept and endorse and defend. Typically statements of faith summarize what the member churches believe about the nature of God, the person and work of Christ, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the nature of God's revelation, the nature and condition of human beings, how God saves people, who can be members of local churches, how local churches should be governed, what is God's goal for this world and the people who live in it, etc.

Our current statement of faith was written and endorsed back in 1950 when the EFCA was formed out of a merger between the Norwegian-Danish EFC in America and the Swedish EFC in America. At that time almost all the members of the 250 charter member churches were of Scandinavian descent. Today there are over 2000 EFCA churches and those of Scandinavian descent are a minority of the membership. However, the changing size and ethnic makeup of the churches is not the reason for this historic revision of our statement of faith. Rather, the reason for this proposed revision is twofold. First, the theological landscape has radically changed in the past 58 years. There are doctrinal controversies at work within the church that were completely unforeseen in 1950. Thus, our SOF needs strengthening so as to keep these controversies from destroying us. Second, one of the guiding principles in our statement of faith has been to limit membership in EFCA churches to believers only but to include all believers. Thus the statement is written in such a way that true Christians who disagree about significant doctrines can live with and love one another in the same church. For many years it has been noted that there are several places in the current SOF that either are not explicit enough in defining what a true Christian must believe and some places are too explicit in defining what a Christian must believe. Thus this week we will be discussing, debating and then voting on the proposed revision. (You can see both the current and proposed revisions at the EFCA website.)

It is because of this historic conference and vote that I decided that on this Sunday I wanted to talk with you about why it is necessary for churches to teach doctrine and why it is necessary for Christians to study doctrine. I aim to convince you that what will be happening in St. Louis this week is incredibly important to every person sitting here. Now, you must know that every person in here, indeed every person in the world has a set of doctrines that they believe and act upon and defend. Every human has a core set of beliefs and values and convictions that govern their lives; that determine how they think and act and speak and feel. Every moment of every day every human is living out the doctrines they believe. Most of the time most people are oblivious to this fact. However, on occasion the entire culture sits up and takes notice when individuals or groups of people exhibit out of the ordinary behavior that comes from firmly held doctrines. Most recently the news media has been fixated upon the polygamist community in Texas founded by the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Here is a group of people who have a number of firmly held doctrines regarding God and marriage and family that has led them to live in a way vastly different from what is deemed normal behavior in the U.S. We all know that the reason these people have lived in this manner is because of what they believe. But it is equally true that the reason that most of us live in monogamous marriages is because of doctrines or beliefs that we hold regarding God and marriage and family. People who live together without getting married do so because of what they believe about God and marriage and family. The terrorists who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 did so because of what they believed about God and salvation and the purpose of life. The reason you don't perform acts of terror is because of what you believe. It isn't just

those people who make the news by their out of the ordinary actions based on out of the ordinary beliefs who believe doctrine. Everyone believes doctrines regarding God, the meaning of life, the purpose of work, etc.

The question is not should I learn and believe doctrine or not? You do have a set of doctrines that you have learned and are learning and these doctrines determine everything about how you are living. Rather, the question we each need to ask is this: is the set of doctrines I hold to true? Am I living my life in light of what is really true in the universe or am I living on the basis of a lie, a deception, a fantasy? Most of the people who live in the U.S. would say that is a question that should not be asked and definitely cannot be answered. Our culture would argue that in light of the vast diversity of belief in the world and in light of our finite and limited point of view there is no way that any human being can possibly know whether or not the doctrines they believe are universally true, that is, they are the doctrines that all humans ought to believe and live in light of. The sad fact of the matter is that this view is not limited to the surrounding secular culture but there is a growing chorus of voices within the church seeking to argue that teaching people there is only one true way to believe is wrong.

Paul's letter to his fellow-worker Titus is a statement about why the church must teach true doctrine and why Christians must learn true doctrine. Notice in the opening three verses how Paul describes that task God has given to him as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He is an apostle "for the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth." This faith and knowledge is based on the hope of eternal life. Then notice how God is described and what he has done. First God is a God who never lies, that is, he always tells the truth. This never-lying God made a promise before he created anything and that promise was that he was going to give eternal life to his elect people. How has he informed his people about this promise? He has informed us through the preaching of Paul and the other apostles which God himself commanded them to give. In other words, there is a set of doctrines that God gave to Paul and the other apostles of Jesus that explains how it is that God is going to give eternal life to his people. This morning, by examining vv. 9-16 of this first chapter of Titus we are going to learn why it is that the church must teach these doctrines and individual Christians must learn them.

MAIN POINT

Churches must concentrate on teaching truth and Christians must concentrate on learning truth because...

I. Biblical truth is God's only instrument for giving and sustaining eternal life (v.9)

In v. 5 we discover the circumstances in which Titus finds himself and thus the reason for Paul's letter to him. Paul has left Titus on the island nation of Crete for a specific purpose. Paul was on the island of Crete along with Titus at some point. What was he doing there? He was preaching what was entrusted to him by the command of God our Savior. He was proclaiming that truth of God, that promise he made before the world began to give eternal life to all who believe God's promise in Christ. What does he want Titus to do? Essentially he wants Titus to visit each of the towns in Crete and to organize those who believed what Paul said in each of these towns into local churches which are to be led by men who are called elders in vv. 5 & 6 and overseers in v. 7. The main thing Titus is to do is, in cooperation with the believers in each town, to identify and appoint men to serve as leaders in each of the local churches. In vv. 6-8 he sets out some of the things that must be true for these leaders. But then in v. 9 he tells Titus what these leaders must do. I want you to think with me about what elders/overseers in local churches are supposed to do.

First, "they are to hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught." The trustworthy message is called "sound doctrine" later in this verse and several other times in this letter. The word "sound" means doctrine that is healthy or wholesome, that is, doctrine that promotes real life. There is a body of truth, a collection of doctrines that has been taught by Jesus and his apostles to which the leaders of every local church must hold fast. Paul assumes that Titus and the elders who will be appointed already know what that trustworthy message is. In this letter he only gives the most cursory outline of that message in 3:3-7. We know these verses are an outline of sound doctrine because in v. 8 Paul calls these verses a trustworthy saying, which, in the original language is the exact same two words translated "trustworthy message" in 1:9.

Notice that it is a message about human sinfulness. It is a message that tells us the truth about ourselves and our hopeless condition. Then it is a message about God: who he is and what he has done. The love of God appeared. In other words God's love entered into human history. God's love was made visible. This love of God saved us, that is, rescued us from some great danger, which in this passage is not clearly spelled out. This rescue operation that God has performed was not because we had somehow made ourselves worthy of being saved. God saves because God loves to be merciful to helpless sinners. Salvation is not motivated by our value but by God's love and mercy. God accomplishes this salvation by means of the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This work of the Holy Spirit has come to us through Jesus Christ who is our Savior. This salvation makes us justified people by means of God's grace. The final result is that we are God's heirs, the recipients of his divine, eternal life. Every one of these statements is like the tip of a massive iceberg of truth that lies under it. There are hundreds passages in the Bible that could be collected under each one of these phrases. In other words the trustworthy message, while it can be summarized in this way, is much more massive and complex than this mere summary.

It is this amazing message of God's saving sinners through Christ by the Spirit that every elder/overseer in every local church is to hold firmly to. The verb used here is the same one that Jesus used in Matthew 6:24 when he said, "No one can serve two masters for either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." In other words, elders are not to merely understand the message but they must love it, depend entirely upon it and be devoted to it. This is not simply intellectual assent to facts but a whole hearted devotion to the truth that God has revealed about himself and his work in the world. How do people serve money? They organize their lives in such a way that they can obtain more of it. People who serve money are always thinking about how to get more of it and to spend less of it. They study and learn new things in order to maximize the money they have. They do this because they have a deep rooted belief that money will give them security and happiness and power and status. They believe money is necessary for life and so they seek to obtain all they can. Every elder is to have this same attitude towards God's truth as revealed in the Bible. Every elder is to organize his life around obtaining more knowledge of and enjoyment of God's truth. Only men who are students of the bible and the doctrines it teaches and who depend upon that truth and love that truth more than life itself are fit to be elders.

Why are elders in each local church to do this? Elders are to hold firmly to the trustworthy message as taught so that they can teach this sound doctrine to others and so that they can rebuke those who disagree with it. If elders are to teach this message is it not implicit that the members of the churches must learn these doctrines? It is so obvious here, as Titus organizes churches in these towns of Crete that the most basic and central need they have is to be taught the message of God's saving work in Christ by men who know it and love it. Every local church must first and foremost be a place where this message is being explained and taught and learned and loved. It is because this message is the only message that explains God is doing in his world and how it is that men and women and children can be part of God's saving plans for this world. It is only by trusting, embracing, loving this message that you and I can be a part of God's people who will inherit the promised eternal life. We must seek to teach this message in every way possible and every one of us must study this message so that we each trust it, love it, embrace it so that we can participate in that eternal life that God promised to his people before he made the world. If you are planning on going to heaven than this book and the doctrines that come from it must be the focus of your attention.

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II. False teachers destroy people (vv. 10-11)

Verse 10 begins with a "for". That means that v. 10 is giving a reason for what he has just said in v. 9. What Paul is saying in v. 10 is that there are many false teachers associated with the church. In the case of the

churches in Crete many of these false teachers, but not all of them, are professing Christians of Jewish descent. That is what he means by the phrase “of the circumcision party.” This really is quite remarkable that right from the beginning of the church in the nation of Crete Paul can say that there are many who have rebelled against the trustworthy message and who are engaging in teaching another message that is useless talk, that is, it is a message that cannot save anyone and it is a deceptive message. It is misleading and a lie. Paul does not specifically say what it is that these false teachers are saying because Titus knows what is being said. There are a few hints in the letter that show that some of the false teachers were saying it was not enough to believe in Jesus but you also had to keep the Jewish purity laws regarding food and ceremonial washings, etc.

In v. 11 Paul expects that the elders of the churches, by their rebuking of these false teachers, are to silence them. False teachers are not to be permitted to continue teaching their errors in the church. 3:10 sets forth the means by which they are to be silenced. After rebuking them twice then the elders are to have nothing more to do with him or her. This is a shorthand way of describing excommunication from the church. If people will not stop spreading error in the church, even after being warned, then they are to be put out of the church.

The main thing I want you to see here however, is the reason they must be silenced. It is because, by their false teaching, they are “ruining whole households.” The word translated “ruin” in this verse is used another time by Paul in 2 Timothy 2:18 where Paul is describing two false teachers named Hymenaeus and Philetus. He says about them that they “...have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already happened and they are upsetting the faith of some.” That word “upsetting” is the same word. What Paul is saying is that false teachers destroy true faith in the true Christ. This doesn't mean that people stop having faith but rather that they begin trusting the wrong thing. Contrary to what many people think, faith has no power in itself. Faith is trust in another and it is only as good as the person or object in which it is placed. For example, if I trust this chair to hold me up by sitting in it, I am held up. What is holding me up, my faith in the chair or the chair itself? The chair. Faith has no power to hold me up. Faith is what enables me to experience the strength of the chair. If I make a chair out of toothpicks and trust it to hold me up, will it? No. Why not? Why didn't my faith work? Because it was in an untrustworthy object. That is what is meant by the ruin of a person's faith: a person's faith is ruined when he or she places it in an untrustworthy object or person. The destruction isn't limited to just a person here or a person there but to entire families. That is how these things work isn't it? If you mislead one member of a family it isn't long until the whole family is misled. Back in 2 Timothy Paul uses a very graphic metaphor to describe the widespread destruction that false teaching brings. He says false teaching spreads like gangrene. This is such an appropriate metaphor. False teaching kills true faith like gangrene kills living tissue. The only way to stop gangrene from spreading and killing the person is to cut off the infected limb. This is exactly what Paul says elders must do. If false teachers are not silenced they will ruin the faith of increasing numbers of people and eventually kill the church.

One of the saddest stories in the whole history of the church is what happened to the Puritan churches in New England. The form of Christianity that existed in the Puritan churches of New England from the founding of the American colonies up to the Revolutionary war was arguably the purest expression of godly doctrine and living that has existed in the history of the church. J.I. Packer, in his book, “A Quest for Godliness”, makes such an argument. Jonathon Edwards, arguably the greatest thinker and theologian America has ever produced was born and raised in these churches and was a pastor in them until his death in 1754. Yet, not more than fifty years after the death of Jonathon Edwards, the Puritan churches of New England had become, by and large, Unitarian churches. That is, they had become churches who did not believe that Jesus Christ was God or the Savior of the world. Jesus was merely a great teacher and example of how to live a good life. It was because false teachers were permitted to spread their empty, deceptive talk that entire households of faith were destroyed. Thus it always has been. Wherever the trustworthy message is not only taught but also defended against error, the faith of Christians is destroyed. Wherever true doctrine is being taught there must also be a negative critique of the false doctrines that are being promulgated within the broader church because if you do not oppose what is false people will embrace it and entire families and churches will be ruined.

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III. We are prone to believe lies (vv. 12-14)

In v. 12 Paul quotes a poet from Crete named Epimenides who lived in the 5th century, B.C. This Cretan poet said about his people that they were always liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons. A rather harsh assessment of one's own people if I might say so. Then Paul says a very shocking thing. He says that this assessment is completely accurate. Paul agrees, Cretan people are always liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons. This poet observed something in the character of the people who lived on the island of Crete five hundred years prior to Paul, which Paul agrees is still an accurate description of the character of the people of Crete. George Knight in his commentary makes this observation about Paul's assessment: "Paul is not making an ethnic slur, but is merely accurately observing, as the Cretans themselves and others did, how the sin that affects the whole human race comes to particular expression in this group." What Paul is observing is something that we all know. Families and tribes and even nations share certain character traits in common with one another. We're not talking about racial stereotypes but rather that, as Knight says, "the sin that affects the whole human race comes to particular expression" in particular groups. We learn particular habits of sinning from our families and our neighbors through a complex web of social and economic relationships. Every culture has certain ways of resisting God's truth. The wise elder is not oblivious to the ways in which the culture in which he lives opposes the gospel but takes it into account as he preaches and teaches. The wise Christian recognizes the ways in which he is culturally inclined to sin and seeks to repent of those inclinations.

It is because of this assessment of the character of the audience on Crete that the elders must rebuke the Cretan people sharply. This culture requires a much stronger confrontation than people in another culture might require. Notice that the strong confrontation has a very positive goal, that the people will be sound in the faith. The goal is that these people have a true faith in the true Christ. In order to bring them to this sound faith they are going to require some sharp rebukes from the elders as their character makes them prone to believe Jewish myths and the commands of those who turn away from the truth.

What every culture shares in common with the Cretan culture is that all of us, for a variety of reasons, are prone to listen to myths and the commands of those who reject the truth of the gospel. This is the same problem Paul describes Timothy facing in a different city, Ephesus. Paul tells Timothy after commanding him, like Titus to preach the word, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." All of us are consummate consumers. We know what we want and we are always on the lookout for the best deal to get it. Our ears are tuned in for the most appealing message we can find, not the most truthful message we can find. We should always be suspicious of ourselves because each one of us wants to hear a message that assures us that we are OK, we have nothing to worry about. We all want to hear that the way we believe and thus the way we live needs no adjustment. The gospel of Jesus is not what any one of us would naturally consider good news. All of us, in order to be sound in the faith are going to have to be stung by sharp rebukes. Cherished beliefs are going to have to be jettisoned. Ways of viewing people and God and ourselves are going to have to change. Our default setting is not faith in the truth but faith in lies and so we need to be part of a community where the truth with all of its hard edges is clearly taught.

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IV. The only way to live right is to believe right (vv. 15-16)

This is one of the main points of this entire letter. In vv. 15-16 he expresses that theme from the negative side. The first sentence in v. 15 is the truth about the Christian's relationship to the OT purity laws. The point he makes is this: if a person has been made clean or pure by Christ, then there is nothing he eats or drinks or touches that can contaminate him or make him unclean in God's eyes. He is thinking here primarily of the food laws and other cleanliness laws in the OT. It's the same point he makes in 1 Timothy 4:1-4 when dealing with false teachers who claim that not eating certain foods is more pleasing to God and being single and celibate is a more spiritual way to live. He says that God made marriage and sex in marriage and food "to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, nothing is to be rejected..." What you eat or don't eat, whether you are single or married has no bearing on your relationship to God or whether or not you are pleasing to him.

In the second half of v. 15 he says that "to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure. In fact, both their mind and their conscience are defiled." The key word in this verse is "unbelieving". All who do not believe the gospel are corrupt, defiled, unclean in God's sight. Their entire person is unfit for God. Therefore, nothing is pure or clean for them. Everything they are and do is, as v. 16 says, detestable to God. Notice that the people about whom Paul is talking profess to know God. These are not atheists who are living completely perverted lives. These are religious, professing Christians who do not believe the trustworthy message as it has been taught but who are adding to it and taking away from it with all sincerity. However, at the end Paul says that these people who do not believe sound doctrine are unfit for doing anything good. Because they believe wrong all that they do is wrong, even what they do for God. Then immediately in 3:1 Paul tells Titus that he and the elders must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. What is in accord with sound doctrine? A certain way of living, a pattern of life that is characterized by good work is what comes from sound doctrine. The clearest expression of this in the positive is in 3:8. After summarizing the sound doctrine Paul tells Titus: "This is a trustworthy message and I want you to insist on these things so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good." Just as not believing the truth makes you unfit for doing anything good so faith in the truth makes you fit for doing what is good. You cannot reverse the order. Right believing always precedes and always leads to right living. As Paul makes clear in Titus, the good works that come from faith in the truth are not simply religious acts or caring for the poor but rather being a faithful husband, wife, child, single person, worker, neighbor. Every person sitting in this room needs to learn sound doctrine so that they can live out the life God has called them to live as a Christian.

It is our ambition as a church to be a place where we have many accessible opportunities for you to learn sound doctrine so that you will be careful to devote yourself to doing good. We've developed a curriculum based on a video series taught by Dr. R.C. Sproul entitled, "Fundamentals of the Faith." It is our ambition that everyone 16 years and older go through all 60 of the sessions. We are offering the next 8 of these sessions which discuss what the Bible teaches about the nature of the church and the meaning of baptism and communion beginning July 16th. I and Tim Hoffland will be leading these 8 sessions. In addition we are continuing to develop our small groups and one to one discipleship opportunities with the goal of having a place for each person 13 and up to be able to investigate the Bible in the context of a small group or with a personal mentor. We hope to have hired another staff member by this fall to be able to assist our leaders in making these even better opportunities. Finally, we continue to work to equip and support parents to hold firmly to the trustworthy message so they can give instruction to their children in sound doctrine. The Westminster Shorter Catechism which the children's messages are based upon is a tool that we want every family unit in the church to be using as it is a very thorough overview of basic Christian doctrine. Our library and website are full of helpful books and resources to help us and our children learn sound doctrine. We need to turn off the TV and use these resources so that we can participate in that eternal life that God promises in Christ and not be ruined by the false teaching that saturates the airwaves and so be careful to do good works.

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