

“The Priority of Biblical Teaching”

2 Timothy 3:1-17

We are in a series that I have given the title, “Convictions of a Disciple-Making Church,” a series in which we are considering what was of primary importance to the first century church. The early church was gripped by certain convictions that determined the way they went about their mission.

The first conviction that I pointed out to you involved the power of corporate prayer. The church in Acts made praying together a central part of their worship gatherings. The apostles determined in Acts 6:4 that above everything else, they would give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. And the principle we can come away with is this—We believe in corporate prayer because without the Holy Spirit’s power, we cannot accomplish the mission that God has given us.

The second conviction involves the priority of the Word of God as being central in the life of the local church. The church in Acts gave themselves to the apostles’ teaching. They prioritized the preaching and teaching of the Word.

From their example, I want us to take a look at how biblical instruction is the backbone of the body of Christ. Do you realize how important your ‘backbone’ is to you? Another way of referring to it is your spinal column. It serves as the vital link between your brain and the rest of your body and is part of your central nervous system. Together with your brain, it controls all of the functions of your body. That’s why spinal injuries are so very serious and can literally shut down a person’s body through paralysis.

A church’s relationship to the Scriptures directly correlate with that church’s health. There are a lot of churches that have no backbone because they’ve laid the Word aside.

A while back, I was driving down the road and began to notice my vehicle began to pull to one side. That's one way that you can always tell when your car needs an alignment. The tires need balancing and rotated. When you lift your hands off the steering wheel, the car drifts to one side. In many ways, this is what the ministry of the church is like. The enemy wants nothing more than to throw our church off balance. We cannot for one moment take our hands off the wheel or our eyes off the road. If we do, it's just a matter of time until we end up in the ditch.

It is only with our hands firmly on the Scriptures and our eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus Christ can we keep it in the road.

Acts 2:42 assures us that the early Christians were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching. Verse 44 says that they became known as 'those who believed,' which implies an objective body of truth that was mutually embraced by them. According to Acts 4:4, the church grew as 'many of those who had heard the message believed.' Again, the principle of priority is emphasized in Acts 6:4 as the apostles continued to devote themselves 'to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.' In light of all their organizational needs, nothing was as important as their need for biblical instruction. And nothing in the church was so pressing that it demanded the leadership of the church to relinquish the ministry of the Word. Because without the ministry of the Word, the church would drift into the ditch.

There are a lot of different passages I could have you turn to in order to show you the priority of God's Word in the life of the church. None are more important than these two chapters in Paul's second letter to Timothy, which I want us to look at over the next few weeks.

Often, a person's last words are their most important. A family gathers around the bedside of a loved one who expresses love and faith before passing. A soldier writes a letter to his wife and family before heading out into the heat of combat. Yes, last words are important words.

The letter of 2 Timothy represents the last words of the apostle Paul. It is last letter that Paul wrote before his death by execution. Together with 1 Timothy and Titus, it consists of a section in the New Testament that is known as the pastoral epistles. They are referred to as such because Timothy and Titus were both pastors of a local congregation. Paul's instructions to these young pastors reveal God's design for leadership in the church. A major theme in these letters is the all important role that preaching and teaching serves in the life of the church.

According to the first letter that Paul wrote to him, Timothy had been assigned to the church in the city of Ephesus. His orders were clear:

1 Timothy 1:3—“As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine.”

Of all the cities in the Roman Empire, the city of Ephesus would have been one the most difficult places to be a pastor. It was a port city that sat along the Aegean Sea at the mouth of the Cayster River near the intersection of two important mountain passes. It commanded a strategic position that offered access in all directions from the sea, which made the city a busy and affluent hub for all of Asia.

Ephesus was known for its paganism that worshiped many gods and goddesses. The pride of Ephesus, however, was its temple devoted to Artemis, aka Diana.

Worship of Diana had become a huge attraction, combining tourism and sensual idolatry with such success that it fueled the city's economy.

For all of its challenges, the location of Ephesus made it a strategic base of operations for Paul's ministry in Asia. The church that he planted there was a beacon of light. And to see that the church remain morally uncorrupted, doctrinally pure, and spiritually vibrant, he spent more time in Ephesus than any other city. He left the church in Timothy's hands.

By the time he writes the letter of 2 Timothy, Paul knew that the executioner could come any moment. Each day could very well become his last. What was on his heart and mind at such a time? Listen to what he tells young Timothy:

1:8—“Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.”

1:14—“Guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”

2:1—“Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

3:14—“Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed.”

4:2-3—“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching.”

Paul is passing the torch on to Timothy. His final words underscore the essential priority of preaching and teaching the truth in a world that has lost its way. If the church doesn't know truth from error, what light will she hold forth to a world enshrouded in darkness? He knew full well that the church lives and dies by the Word of God. And so I want us to spend some time looking at what he tells Timothy about the priority of biblical teaching. I'm not sure how far I'll get this

morning, but from these chapters I want to show you why preaching and teaching the Bible must be priority. To begin with, I want you to consider:

1. The DIFFICULTY that is characteristic of the age (3:1-9)

“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people...”

Up until this point in his letter, Paul has had much to say to Timothy about his calling and character. Important!

The apostolic body of doctrine that he had received from Paul, he was to pass on to some faithful men who could teach others also. To do this would mean that he share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ. He was to put the brethren in constant remembrance of the truth.

2 Timothy 2:15—“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”

Such a task demanded that he flee youthful passions and the sins of the flesh. He must pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. He must not become sidetracked with foolish controversies that would get both him as well as the church off in a ditch.

2 Timothy 2:24-26—“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his

opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses...”

Timothy’s calling was to the truth. He was set apart for the truth, he was instructed in the truth, he was to teach truth.

This calling would not be easy because he was to faithfully live it out in a corrupt culture that sets itself in opposition to God’s truth. Paul’s words in chapter 3 call attention to this.

“But understand this...”

The word Paul uses here appears in the present tense, imperative mood, and literally can be translated, “Keep on knowing this.” In other words, he is saying, “Timothy, as you go about your pastoral duties of upholding the truth and teaching sound doctrine, be mindful of what I’m about to tell you. I’m fixing to tell you something that you must be well aware of.” Well, what does Paul go on to say?

“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.”

He is speaking of what lies ahead in the ‘last days,’ where he says there will be times of difficulty and hardship for those in gospel ministry.

“Last Days” — *a phrase that refers to the entire time from the completion of Christ’s redemptive work until His future return (Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2)*

Society is not becoming more utopian as some believe; it is becoming more decadent. If Timothy failed to understand this, it could potentially lead to disillusionment in ministry and a misunderstanding of his calling. His responsibility as a guardian and proclaimer of God’s truth would be met by constant resistance because savage times of difficulty were just up ahead.

Rather than welcoming his message, the world would oppose it. Timothy was to anticipate times of hardship for gospel ministry. And the reason Paul gives has to do with the inherent sinfulness of people who are opposed to the truth because they are blinded by sin.

In other words, the times are savage because people are sinful. Human depravity will be on parade. Beginning with verse 2, there are nineteen total characteristics that will be true of people in these ‘times of difficulty’ that Timothy is to anticipate. Each one of these characteristics deserve our careful attention. I should warn you that it will be painful.

The apostle Paul says that people will be depraved in what they do, deceived in what they believe, disguised in what they are, and dangerous in what they teach.

Depraved in what they do

- Lovers of self (v. 2a)

This represents the doctrine of the age, the predominant belief that you and your needs are more important than anything else. It is the notion that the world revolves around you and your happiness. We would use the word ‘narcissism’ to describe this characteristic that Paul mentions first. In ancient Greek mythology, Narcissus was the young man who fell in love with his own reflection. As he sat beside the pool, gazing affectionately at his own image, he wasted away and died.

Let me tell you something—we absolutely live in a time in which people are in love with themselves. As a society of people, we’ve become narcissistic to the core. It is not coincidental that this characteristic is at the first of Paul’s list,

because all the others will flow from this one. Self-worship is the fountainhead of all other corruption.

- Lovers of money (v. 2b)

The idea is that of greed and materialism. People who are in love with themselves want to lavish gifts upon their true object of worship. And so they spare no expense on themselves. They go in debt up to their eyeballs to buy things that they've convinced themselves that they cannot live without. They buy stuff they don't need with money they don't have to impress people they don't like.

1 Timothy 6:10—“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.”

- Proud (v. 2c)

The word used here means to be 'lifted up in countenance.' It is a word that speaks of excessive self-esteem. Humility is not a virtue to those in love with themselves. They see themselves as being most important, the hero in all of their storytelling.

- Arrogant (v. 2d)

The proud are also arrogant, a word that means to have an exaggerated sense of one's own importance. It carries the idea of setting oneself up over others.

- Abusive (v. 2e)

The word used here is also the same word for 'blasphemy.' It is to be offensive and insulting toward both God and one's fellow man.

- Disobedient to parents (v. 2f)

The word here describes the breakdown of the home as depravity takes its toll out on society. Junior tells mom and dad what to do rather than mom and dad telling junior what to do. Times of difficulty will come for the church when many among the younger generation will have no regard for the instruction of the older generation.

Our suburbs and inner cities are now beginning to reap the consequences of a generation of fatherlessness. Where there isn't a respect for parental figures, don't be surprised when there isn't any respect for other authority figures in the society at large.

- Ungrateful (v. 2g)

To be ungrateful means a lack of grace and gratitude on display in one's life. The ungrateful person never stops to say 'thank you' because he or she really believes that they are owed everything that they get, an 'entitlement' spirit.

- Unholy (v. 2h)

The word is 'anosios.' As is true with most of the words mentioned here in the list, there is a negative prefix 'a' that negates the positive quality. Without the negative prefix, the word means sacred, lawful, or dutiful. Add that little prefix, and the word means profane, sinful, and wicked.

The 'unholy' person doesn't simply reject the laws of God; he or she refuses to even abide by rules of common decency.

Profanity will characterize society in these difficult times.

- Heartless (v. 3a)

Older translations say ‘without natural affection.’ The idea is that people will be lacking in feeling or lacking in consideration of others. The heartless person is hardened. He offers nothing to others without expecting something in return.

- Unappeasable (v. 3b)

In other words, they are irreconcilable. They are willing to walk away from others without seeking to be reconciled. They can’t admit their wrongdoing, they refuse to forgive offenses, and they remain at odds with everyone.

- Slanderous (v. 3c)

The NASB translates this word as ‘malicious gossips.’ The word is ‘diabolos’ and is the same word used for ‘devil’ in the New Testament. It means ‘accuser.’ The devil seduces men and women into sin, and then he accuses them before God so as to widen the rift in their relationship.

A human ‘diabolos’ does the same thing in a community, a church, or a family. People will give no thought to accusing someone else in order to suit their own ends.

- Without self-control (v. 3d)

This is descriptive of the person who is unrestrained in their appetites, who shuns all inhibition in pursuit of desire. It is the person who has lost control of his life and has become a slave to his own passions and lusts. Such a one can be described as having gone off the rails.

- Brutal (v. 3e)

The one who is ‘brutal’ doesn’t care who he or she has to destroy in order to get what he or she wants. It is to be without any attempt to disguise unpleasantness.

- Not loving good (v. 3f)

It describes those who love what is evil and hate what is truly good. They are among those who substitute light for darkness and darkness for light, who substitute what is bitter for what is sweet (Is. 5:20).

- Treacherous (v. 4a)

This same word is used to describe Judas Iscariot in Luke 6:16. The 'treacherous' are guilty of betrayal and deception, turning against their family and friends and church as well as all that they've been taught in pursuit of their own selfish dictates. The word carries the idea of betraying the well-being of another for the sake of personal gain.

- Reckless (v. 4b)

The word means to rush headlong into trouble. Those who are reckless are without thought or care for the consequence of an action. In other words, it doesn't matter what happens to someone else as the result of their own choices. They are careless and negligent, and are so preoccupied with their own interests that they simply don't notice anyone or anything else other than their own egotistic and self-centered concerns.

- Swollen with conceit (v. 4c)

It is to be high-minded and puffed up. The root word has the idea of being clouded in a fog or smoke. It means that a person can't see outside of his own little world. It pictures someone whose lofty view of himself towers over others, someone deluded by his own sense of importance.

- Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (v. 4d)

Hedonistic pleasure is all that this person lives for. God and His truth has no place in his or her thinking. All that matters is what makes me feel good in the moment. It is the worship of amusement and entertainment.

Deceived in what they believe

Verse 5 says, "...having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power." They are religious, but not truly righteous. They pretend to be godly, but have no power.

Go back through the list and realize that Paul isn't just describing a secular culture without knowledge of Christ—he is describing the character of many in the church in the last days, both the leaders as well as those they lead.

John Stott—*"They evidently attended the worship services of the church. They sang the hymns. They said the 'amen' to the prayers, and they put their money in the offering plates. They looked and sounded egregiously pious. But it was form without power, outward show without inward reality, religion without morals, and faith without works."*

Paul is telling Timothy to anticipate difficult times in which people infiltrate the church who have a thin veneer of what looks like Christianity, but it is ultimately a watered down and powerless pseudo version.

Disguised in what they are

Look at what he says in verses 6-7:

"For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth."

He is not referring to women in general, but of a certain cultural dynamic that was true in Ephesus. False teachers had targeted these households and pretended to offer substance, but it was knowledge without truth.

Dangerous in what they teach

“Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.”

Jewish tradition says that these were Pharaoh’s magicians who mimicked the miraculous workings of Moses and Aaron, but it was nothing more than cheap parlor tricks. It wasn’t the power of God.

Pharaoh’s court magicians have always been able to mesmerize the masses. They can pack coliseums and arenas with their charismatic personalities, but they are really opposed to the truth. All they need is a little bit of smoke, a little bit of lights, a little bit of music, a little bit of a sermon, and they can convince people that they've experienced the power of the Holy Spirit.

Philippians 3:3—“...who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

You say, “What does all of this have to do with the convictions of a disciple-making church?” The answer is that it has everything to do with it.

Listen—the church that makes disciples is under no impression that people are inherently good. Instead, a church that makes disciples understands that man’s basic problem is his sin and alienation from God and his desperate need is for true salvation. His eyes must be opened to the truth. That’s why the Word of God is our one and only weapon of choice.

Hebrews 4:12—“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

Why else would Paul say what he does next?

2. The DILIGENCE that is required of the church (3:10-15)

3. The DYNAMIC that is true of the Scriptures (3:16-17)

It is the truth of God’s Word that exposes our sin for what it is and points sinners to the gospel cure. That is why Paul is going to tell Timothy to:

4:2—“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

Because the time would come when people will not endure sound doctrine, but having itching ears they will heap up for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.

In a world that has lost its way, the Word of God is our one and only sure foundation. This is what Timothy must give himself to.

As I go back through Paul’s list, I can’t help but see that apart from Jesus Christ, this is me! Each one of these sinful characteristics is true of me apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Which is why the gospel is such good news. Jesus Christ came to save me from my sin and sinfulness. The Bible tells me that He came to rescue me from judgment.

You’ve heard these lyrics by Zach Williams:

If you’ve got pain

*He's a pain taker
If you feel lost
He's a way maker
If you need freedom or saving
He's a prison-shaking Savior
If you've got chains
He's a chain breaker*

There is hope and freedom to be found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. What people need is the life-giving, chain-breaking, soul-saving, hell-shaking Word of the living God.

Timothy's task as a pastor was to preach the Word, teach the Word, and point people to the hope of salvation found only through faith in Jesus Christ. That's my task. That is our task as a church that seeks to make disciples.

Do you know Christ personally?

"Father, I praise You for the truth and power of Your Word! Together with Your Spirit, it alone has the power to convict, convert, and convince sinners of Your Son. Amen."