

No Different Doctrine!

1 Samuel 3:1-21, 1 Timothy 1:1-20 (ESV)

May 7, 2006

On the south wall of this sanctuary, directly in front of most of you, is the Dr. J. Calvin Stewart memorial stained glass window. In the eastern most of its large panels, to your left, stands the apostle Peter holding two massive keys of the kingdom, presented to him by Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:19). In the center panel stands the apostle John, holding a large chalice, representing the Lord's Supper, which we shall receive today. And in the western most panel, to your right, stands the apostle Paul holding a sword in his hand. Yes, he is holding a sword, as politically incorrect as that may be today. Perhaps this would be of interest to some of the young men present here today. For you see, Paul is a warrior, and he is holding high a sharp, two edged sword, with which to do battle with the forces of evil. And the sword represents the word of God (Ephesians 6:17). Yes, the sword he holds high represents the word of God, the very gospel of Jesus Christ which Paul preached to the world.

It is this word of God which God entrusted to Paul. It is this word of God which Paul entrusted to Timothy. It is this word of God alone by which faith is born and by which alone the church of Jesus Christ lives. No wonder Paul wrote to Timothy, "I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine." No wonder Paul holds high the sword and says, "I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine." No wonder Paul declares, "I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine."

The occasion of this letter intensifies the urgency of this appeal. Paul was getting old. Timothy was young. Paul was an experienced pastor. Timothy was new. Paul was becoming limited in his ability to travel, perhaps due to imprisonment because of his preaching. Timothy was, effectively, his associate pastor in Ephesus, assigned there to extend Paul's work. And Paul was handing off that mighty sword to Timothy. Paul was entrusting him with the word of God, with the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, with the teaching of the Christian faith, and with the building up of the church. This was the changing of the guard. No wonder Paul wrote to Timothy, "I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine."

The significance of these words both then and now is profound and far reaching. First of all, they mean that there is a doctrine. There is a heart. There is a core to the gospel and to the Christian faith, and Paul taught it all those centuries ago, and it is not up to Timothy or to anyone else to change it. There is a core doctrine to the Christian faith, and we are not to add to it. We are not to take away

from it. We are not to change it or to modify it. We are to teach it as is. We are to preach it as is. We are to believe it as is. That is our duty. That is our joy. That is our very life. Thanks be to God!

Second, these words mean that the doctrine is accessible, teachable, and learnable. It is not hidden, esoteric, or arcane. It is not secret. It does not have to be found. It does not have to be improved upon. It does not have to be adjusted or made to fit our predilections. It does not have to be updated. It is fine just as it is.

Third, that Paul had to urge Timothy at all to exhort certain persons in the church at Ephesus “not to teach any different doctrine” means, of course, that certain persons in the church were already teaching different doctrine. Already, so close in time to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so close in time to the beginning of the church, certain persons were already teaching different doctrine, as if they knew better than God, as if they knew better than Jesus Christ, as if they knew better than the Scriptures, as if they knew better than the apostles, as if they knew better than Paul. Oh, the audacity and the insufferable arrogance! Certain persons were already abandoning the gospel of Jesus Christ. Certain persons were emphasizing law over gospel. Certain persons were ignoring redemption and the forgiveness of sin. Certain persons were forfeiting salvation and the promise of eternal life. In fact, certain persons had left the Christian faith but wanted to be teachers in the church. Does any of this sound familiar? Do we not have the same problem in the church at large today? Certain persons were attempting to teach different doctrine, though, in truth, there is no different Christian doctrine.

Fourth, this ancient doctrine has been carried through the centuries in the word of the Scriptures and in the historic faith of the Christian church. It has been well enshrined in the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. It has been preached from faithful pulpits around the world. It has been taught in faithful homes around the world and lived in faithful lives around the world. There has always been a temptation to try to add to this ancient doctrine, to dress it up, to water it down, to tame it, to twist it, or to domesticate it. But at its best, the church has resisted such temptations and has tried to strip away centuries of accretions and traditions so that this ancient word may stand alone and unsullied, speaking to us clearly and truly, again and again, even today.

This effort at recovery represents the best work of the Reformation. And this sets forth the choice that is before the church today. Shall we continue to try to hear the one word of God, reaching back through the centuries to reclaim it unchanged, or shall we seek to modify or to improve it, to reimagine it in our own images, to bring it forward to conform with the sentiments of our day, pretending that such change is progress? Shall we be faithful, or shall we be fickle? Shall we take up the sword, or shall we fall to tolerance, diversity, pluralism, and inclusivity? Shall we

remain true, or shall we take up the post-modern mantra that there is no truth, only personal opinion, none of which matters to anyone else? A terrible choice lies before the church of Jesus Christ again today.

In the middle of this first chapter, Paul gives a good and useful summary of the gospel: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” To say that it is “trustworthy” is to say that it is from God. To say that it is “deserving of full acceptance” means that it is received by faith. That Jesus is the “Christ” means that he is the anointed one of God, sent by and from God to carry out God’s good will in the world. That he “came into the world” is what we celebrate at Christmas, and this is the most Paul has to say about that. And to say that Jesus came into the world “to save sinners” is to state the purpose of it all: He came for us! He came for us! He came to save us from our sin. Paul tells us elsewhere how Jesus does this, through his crucifixion and resurrection. But here Paul tells us why Jesus does this. And note carefully that the why has to do with salvation from sin.

If we were to refuse to acknowledge sin, then the gospel would be pointless and Jesus would have died in vain. If we were to say there is no sin, then there would be no salvation. If we were to think that nothing we do is wrong, then there would be no reason for Jesus to have come. If we refuse to admit that we sin, if we want the church to condone as good everything we do, then we forfeit salvation, we reject the work and person of Jesus Christ, and we refuse the good gifts of God. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Can we accept this? It is not the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ, of the doctrine of the church, or of Christian faith to make us feel good about ourselves. It is, instead, the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ, of the doctrine of the church, and of Christian faith to present us before the throne of God Almighty. A terrible choice lies before the church of Jesus Christ again today. Do we have enough of the warrior left in us to stand up and fight for the gospel of Jesus Christ?

On the south wall of this sanctuary is the Dr. J. Calvin Stewart memorial stained glass window. In the western most panel stands the apostle Paul holding a sword in his hand. Yes, he is holding high a sharp, two edged sword, with which to do battle with the forces of evil. And the sword he holds represents the word of God (Ephesians 6:17). Perhaps some of our young people here today are being called to take up this sword. It is this word of God which God and the church have entrusted to us. And it is this word of God which, if this congregation so votes to call him and if the presbytery so votes to approve, we will soon entrust to our new associate pastor, Christopher James Thomas.

We have before us today both the reality of, and the opportunity for, yet another generational shift in the ongoing ministry and life of the church. And the ancient warning still stands: “I urged you...not to teach any different doctrine.” Are we ready to support Mr. Thomas in the pure preaching of the gospel? Are we ready to support him in the pure teaching of doctrine? Are we ready to support him in the building up of the church? Are we, as a congregation, ready and armed with the word of God, so as to be able to stand with Mr. Thomas against any alien influences from outside and beyond the church that seek to redefine our doctrine or to teach any different doctrine than this historic faith of the church?

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org