

Hold Firm to the Word!

Exodus 18:13-23, Titus 1:5-16 (ESV)

February 26, 2006

“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” These are the words of the Apostle Paul to his associate Titus about the duties of a teaching elder. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” These apostolic words set an authoritative standard for the office of Christian pastor still today, and therefore they tell us a great deal about the nature and reality of the Christian congregations which such pastors continue to serve. There is gospel in the assumptions here, the foundation of this standard, and there is gospel in the implications here, the consequences of this standard for the life you and I share together.

“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” The starting point of the gospel here is not only that the word is trustworthy or even that there is a word at all but also that this word is from God and so is the word of God. That is the only reason that any of this is good, useful, or important. The trustworthy word is from God and so is the word of God. That is to say, the first, grace filled affirmation of good news here is that God is. God is! God exists. God lives. God reigns. God rules. God overrules. God abides in perfect majesty and dominion. With this we have everything. Without it we would have nothing. First then, God is.

Second, God speaks. In that the trustworthy word is from God and so is the word of God, God who is also speaks. That is to say, God communicates. God says something from the silence of the heavens into the silences of our lives. This means that we to whom he speaks—we to whom he speaks—we exist at his good pleasure, we exist as his creatures, we exist by his good grace, we exist by his providence, we exist by his care, we exist because he says so. He speaks. He created us by his word. We have no good apart from him. He who created us also communicates to us by his word. All our good is to be found in that word. Thanks be to God!

Third, God who is and who speaks also reveals himself to us in his word. Apart from this, we would not and could not know anything about him. We do not have the strength or the intelligence or the perceptivity to be able to penetrate the hiddenness of God and to find him out by ourselves. You will remember that the

fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is, “What is God?” And the answer is, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” We do not have the power to see the invisible, to comprehend the infinite, to perceive the eternal, or to grasp the unchangeable. We cannot do that. That is to say, we cannot discover or know God on our own. That is not possible. And that is why it is so good and wonderful that God reveals himself to us, opens himself to us, makes himself known to us, and so reclaims us as his own.

Fourth, God who is, who speaks, and who reveals himself to us in his word, does so preeminently in and through Jesus Christ. Of all the words that could be said, of all the words that are said, this one in particular is the word of God from God and to us in which God most fully and completely and perfectly reveals himself to us. What God wants to say to us and does say to us he says most clearly in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is where we hear the self-revealing word of God spoken to us. Jesus Christ is where we see what we see of God. Jesus Christ is where we learn of God. Jesus Christ is where we receive God. Apart from Jesus Christ we would have nothing. We would have only silence and darkness and emptiness. We would know nothing. But with Jesus Christ we have everything. For with Jesus Christ we have God’s self-revelation. With Jesus Christ we know everything about God that we need to know.

Fifth, God who is, who speaks, who reveals himself to us in his word, and who does so preeminently in and through Jesus Christ, also speaks that same word in and throughout the world in the gospel of and about Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and has ascended into heaven. But that has not limited his influence. It is not the case that only those who met him in the flesh can benefit from the self-revelation of God which he brought to us. Instead, the content of that self-revelation has been contained within the good news of the birth, life, ministry, teachings, healings, miracles, trials, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ. It is all there! What God has to tell us about himself, about his heart, about his purpose, about his reason, about his love, about his beauty, about his depth, about his plan, about his accomplishment, is all there in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sixth, God who is, who speaks, who reveals himself to us in his word, who does so preeminently in and through Jesus Christ, and who speaks that same word in the gospel of and about Jesus Christ, also preserves that good word for us in the scriptures of the Holy Bible. It is not only an ancient word. It certainly is not a vague or unspecific word. It is a very particular word, spoken and lived at a particular time and place, and preserved for us in the very particular words of the scriptures of the Holy Bible. These words are given to us. We have received them.

They are what they are. We did not write them. We did not make them up. Nor do we have the authority to rewrite them to suit our fancy, to fit our predilections, to serve our ideologies, to advance our causes, or to support our prejudices. Yes, the word is spoken for us. But in order for it to be spoken for us, it has first been spoken to us. It is over us, not the other way around. And in order to help keep that priority right, the word has not been entrusted to our memories but has been written down and preserved in the scriptures of the Holy Bible.

Everything said so far in this sermon after the first five sentences has been said in explication of the one word “word.” It carries a tremendous amount of meaning. It occurs to me that we should hear that word again in the context of the whole sentence in which it appears before we press on. “He [the teaching elder or pastor] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” So, seventh, this preserved word of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the spoken self-revelation of God who is, is also trustworthy. It is true. It is reliable. It is dependable. We can count on it. This, too, is good news about the good news. It is trustworthy. In a world of falsehood, contempt, and hatred, in a world that denies the reality of truth and even the possibility of truth, in a world of spin and constant ideological taint, it is good to know and to be reassured again that there is a sure and trustworthy word of God.

Eighth, this trustworthy word of God is also taught and therefore is teachable. It is not only written down and preserved in the scriptures of the Holy Bible, but it is also embedded in our creeds, catechisms, and confessions of faith, it is also read and preached from the pulpits of our churches, it is also heard and believed in the sanctuaries of our churches, and it is also read and taught in our Sunday School classes, and in our Wednesday Night Supper programs, and in our Presbyterian Women Bible Study Circles, and in our Vacation Bible Schools, and in our homes, and on and on and on. The word of God is taught. To all who have ears to hear, the word of God is taught. Anyone who does not learn it is without excuse. And it is especially incumbent upon the teaching elders, the pastors, the preachers of the church, to learn the trustworthy word of God exactly as it is taught. Apart from the trustworthy word of God, we would have nothing worthwhile to say. Nothing at all. But with the trustworthy word of God, we have the very gospel of Jesus Christ and of God his Father who sent him.

Ninth, and pulling all of this together, the teaching elder must, for the sake of the church—and we will get to that in just a moment—the teaching elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” The teaching elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” That is his duty. That is his honor. That is his privilege. That is his ministry. That is what he is to do. That is why he is called a minister of

the word. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” It is not up to the minister to wander away from the word. That would be a punishable dereliction of duty, and if the church does not discipline such ministers, there is a higher court. It is not up to the minister to go easy on the word, to carry it lightly into the church, to belittle or to ignore it. It is not up to the minister to teach conventional wisdom or even common sense instead of the word of God. It is the duty of the minister, for the sake of the church, to “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” So help me God! No one said it was easy. But if it must be done, then it can be done. To require it is at the very least to indicate that it is possible. And since Paul commands it with his apostolic authority, he speaks on behalf of God, and it is up to us to obey it.

Why is all of this so important? Why is this highest requirement of a minister, the last in Paul’s list of requirements, so very important for the church? Paul gives us two reasons, cutting both directions like the two edges of a sword. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able [1] to give instruction in sound doctrine and also [2] to rebuke those who contradict it.” The expression, the very purpose, of holding firm to the word is “[1] to give instruction in sound doctrine and also [2] to rebuke those who contradict it.” That is what ministers are supposed to do, in and for the church, for the good of the church, for the faithfulness of the church, for the life and well-being of the church, for the building up of the church, for the integrity of the church, for the peace, unity, and purity of the church, and so for the church to be the church. That is what ministers of the word, as teaching elders, are supposed to do. There are a lot of other things that the ruling elders do. There are a lot of other things that the deacons do. There are a lot of other things that the staff does. There are a lot of other things that the members do. But this is what ministers are supposed to do: “[1] to give instruction in sound doctrine and also [2] to rebuke those who contradict it.” Every distraction from this works to the detriment of the church.

First, the teaching elder is “to give instruction in sound doctrine.” He is to preach the gospel. He is to teach the Bible. He is to give instruction in the faith. He is to catechize the young. He is to comfort the distraught. He is to counsel the strong. And in all of this he is “to give instruction in sound doctrine.” Notice, of course, that if there is sound doctrine there is also unsound doctrine. Otherwise the adjective would be superfluous. That is to say, while there is good and faithful doctrine and there is also doctrine that is less than good or faithful. It may even be bad and faithless doctrine. So not all doctrine is good. Not all doctrine is sound. Not all doctrine is faithful. Not all doctrine is equal. And it is incumbent upon us to deal in sound doctrine. Not personal opinion. Sound doctrine.

We here in America tend to believe that we are free to believe whatever we want to believe. And at some level that is true. But it does not insure that various

freely held opinions are equally good. So it is not true for Christians that we are free to believe whatever we want to believe. It is not true for members of the church of Jesus Christ that we are free to believe whatever we want to believe. We are not free to believe whatever nonsense we want to believe if we want to continue to be members of his church. We are not free to believe whatever evil distortions of the faith we want to believe if we want to continue to be his disciples. We are not free to believe whatever personal version of the gospel we choose if we want to be under his lordship. We are not free to believe whatever personal truth we think we know as if we knew better than Jesus Christ. We are not even free to follow our consciences over and against the content of the Bible as if we knew better than God. We simply are not free to do any of those things if we want to be Christians and if we want to be members of the church of Jesus Christ. Instead, we are called to believe the sound doctrine based on the trustworthy word of God as taught in the church throughout the centuries. That is who we are. And that is why teaching sound doctrine is so vitally important and even necessary.

Second, the teaching elder who gives instruction in sound doctrine is “also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Oddly enough, it appears that such pastoral rebuking takes place within the church. It is neither here nor there whether those outside the church contradict sound doctrine. So it must be within the church. But this rebuking has nothing to do with personal enemies. This has instead to do with enemies of the gospel, enemies of the faith, and therefore enemies of the church. We live in an age of much touted tolerance, inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism. In some ways, and to some extent, these can be good things. But there is no room in the Christian church for tolerating unsound doctrine. That would not be kind. That would be stupid. And there is no room in the Christian church for including that which is anti-Christian in the teachings of the church. That would not be generous. That would be suicidal. There is no room in the Christian church for a diversity of belief beyond the Christian faith and beyond the boundaries of scripture. That would not be open. That would be faithless. And there is no room in the Christian church for a pluralism of alien faiths and unfaiths as if the content of faith did not matter. That would not be wise and urbane. That would be only a letting go and a casting away of the one trustworthy word of God. God, help us! It is a part of the duty of the pastors, and therefore a part of the duty of the church acting through the pastors, not only to give instruction in sound doctrine but “also to rebuke those who contradict it.” We are to identify, to name, to counter, and even to rebuke the enemies of the faith and therefore the enemies of the church whosoever they may be, wherever they may be, however far they run, no matter how well they hide. The well-being of the church depends upon it.

Hold Firm to the Word!

6

Remember, God who is, who speaks, who reveals himself to us in his word, who does so preeminently in and through Jesus Christ, and who speaks that same word in the gospel of and about Jesus Christ, also preserves that good word for us in the scriptures of the Holy Bible. And from that Bible come these words of the Apostle Paul to his associate Titus about the duties of a teaching elder. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” These apostolic words set an authoritative standard for the office of Christian pastor still today, and therefore they tell us a great deal about the nature and reality of the Christian congregations which such pastors serve. May God help us in all these matters.

To God be the 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