

**“Doctrinal Purity”**  
**1 Timothy 1:1-11**  
**August 23, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We are beginning today a study of Paul’s letters to Timothy. His first letter was written because of a crisis that had developed within the church in Ephesus. This was a church that was established during one of Paul’s missionary journeys. Uncharacteristically, he spent two years in Ephesus, teaching and evangelizing. This was now several years after that church had been established, and Paul hears of serious doctrinal error that has invaded this church. He is writing Timothy because he wants Timothy to pay a visit to the church and straighten out this problem. Paul says it like this: **“Remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine”** (1:3).

We have a problem right off the bat as we approach this passage. It’s a problem of relevancy. What possible relevance could a 1<sup>st</sup> century doctrinal dispute have upon 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans? This relevance issue is made more acute by the very low value given to doctrinal purity in our day. It’s worse than assigning low value to doctrinal purity; it’s seen as being harmful. In the early twentieth century, a strong ecumenical emphasis arose that downplayed the importance of doctrine. One of the slogans of that era captures the sentiment that was present: “Doctrine divides, service unites.” Our congregation was affected by this. This church began in 1854 as a Cumberland Presbyterian congregation. In the ecumenical movement, there was a merger in 1906 between the northern Presbyterian Church and the mostly southern Cumberland Presbyterian Church. This merger was interesting because it minimized the historic doctrinal differences between those two denominations. The Cumberland Presbyterians were historically Arminian in their theology, while the Northern Presbyterians were more Calvinistic. But a minority among the Cumberland Presbyterians wanted to maintain their denomination, and this congregation was split into two groups as a result of this dispute. The group that wanted to proceed with the merger relocated to this location in 1911, and the other group stayed on Rocky Ridge Road. That’s how this southern church came to be part of the northern Presbyterians prior to our joining of the PCA in 1979.

If anything, doctrinal purity has become even less important since the early twentieth century. One thing is clear, though, and that is that it was not unimportant to the apostle Paul. Many would say that Paul’s emphasis here reflects a more barbaric and primitive view of religion, one that we have now outgrown. Could it be, though, that Paul saw something that most in our culture don’t see? Is it possible that Paul was so concerned for doctrinal purity not because he knew less than we do, but because he knew more? Could it be that

doctrinal impurity leads to some of our social and personal problems? Notice three things we learn about doctrinal purity in this passage.

## I. The Agent of Doctrinal Purity

Paul's appointed agent to put things right in the church at Ephesus was Timothy. Let's consider for just a moment the circumstances leading up to this. There is less certainty about Paul's actions in the time period following the ending of Luke's account in the book of Acts. As you may remember, Acts concludes with Paul in Rome, where he had been sent for trial after his arrest in Jerusalem. Following his release, he travelled back East, rather than sticking with his original plan to go West to what is now Spain. Travelling with Timothy, he came to Ephesus, where he found the church afflicted with some significant doctrinal error. For some reason, Paul was not able to stay long enough to straighten things out himself. He had some pressing business in Macedonia, and probably writes this letter from that region.

It is interesting that Paul never traces the outline of this false teaching. He simply calls it here a **"different doctrine"** (v. 3). In other words, it lies outside the accepted teachings of the apostles. It's possible that he views this false teaching as so inferior so as to be undeserving of serious intellectual debate. In his book on the theology of the New Testament, our own Frank Thielman summarizes the situation like this.

The nature of the false teaching is difficult to describe, and this is probably a direct result of Paul's intense lack of sympathy for it. It is 'meaningless talk' (1:6), 'old wives' tales' (4:7), and 'godless chatter' (6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16). Its advocates are 'mere talkers' (Titus 1:10) who, despite an air of confidence, do not understand what they are talking about (1 Tim. 1:7; 6:4). [p. 409]

The point I want to make here is that it is clear from Paul's letter that the main defense the church has against doctrinal impurity is its leaders. He authorizes Timothy to set things straight, and one of the things Timothy is to do is to pay careful attention to those who become the church's leaders. Lest we think of these leaders as mighty heroes riding in on their white horses to save the day, let's look at the kind of leader Timothy was. Like all church leaders, he had his weaknesses. At least three emerge in this letter.

Timothy was young. We don't know his exact age at the time Paul wrote this letter, but he was young enough that people tended to discount what he said because of his youth. So Paul had to write to him about how he could overcome this handicap of youthfulness. **"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity"** (4:12). He also seemed to be temperamentally shy. Paul had to remind him that he had been given **"a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control"**

(2 Tim. 1:7). I notice also that Paul had to urge him to stay in Ephesus in order to deal with this problem. **“As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine”** (1:3). It is likely that Paul had to speak this way because everything in Timothy wanted to get out of town and walk away from this confrontation. Finally, Timothy was prone to some type of gastric illness, with the result that Paul urged him **“No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments”** (5:23).

It is the duty of the leaders God gives to a church to maintain doctrinal purity in that church. It was the failure of the leaders of the church in Ephesus to do just this that was the source of all the problems in this church. The application is this. Value doctrinal purity in your leaders more than the more showy parts of leadership. It is a sad reality that in many churches what is valued in a leader are such unimportant things as how well he dresses, how attractive he is, having a good sense of humor or his level of self-confidence. Timothy didn't measure up well against the more popular and showy standards of leadership. The leaders who had led the church astray doctrinally seemed to possess some of these very qualities that Timothy lacked. We know that they were at least self-confident. Paul says about them in verse 7 that they do not understand **“either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.”** In other words, they were often wrong, but never in doubt. Value in your leaders the quality of faithfulness to the Scriptures.

## **II. The Outcome of Doctrinal Purity**

Verse 5 gives one of the chief reasons why doctrinal purity is important. **“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”** The charge to which he is referring is the one not to teach any different doctrine. In other words, the outcome of doctrinal purity is love. Love is a universally embraced goal, but not a universally-achieved outcome. If there were an election between love and hate, 99.9% of the voters would choose love. The practice of love, however, is not so widespread. We all have known premarital couples who are filled with great hopes for a lifelong, love-filled marriage. But over the first year or two of marriage, hate grows to the point that both spend a great deal of time daydreaming about ways they can bring harm to the other. Others who would vote for love secretly rejoice when harm befalls one of their rivals at work. Love is universally applauded, but hate almost universally practiced. Consider the prevalence of anger while engaged in the common task of driving a car. Jesus said anger is a form of hate. I remember years ago riding with someone down the single lane streets of Philadelphia. At an intersection we were approaching, the driver of another car didn't see our car and began to pull out in front of us, even though we had the right of way. The driver of the car in which I was riding had to slam on his brakes, but the other car finally saw us and allowed us to pass. The driver of my car was angry at having to

slam on his brakes, and when he saw the offending driver pull in behind him on this single lane street, he slowed down to about a half-mile an hour, just to retaliate against the other driver for his mistake.

Why is hate so common, not just among murderers in prison, but among otherwise upstanding, hard-working citizens who go to work every day and pay their bills on time? Paul says it's because of false doctrine. Love comes from sound doctrine. What is the connection between sound doctrine and love? According to verse 5, the connection lies in the area of a **“pure heart and a good conscience.”** Only sound doctrine can provide a cleansed conscience, and only a clean conscience can lead to love. Paul makes a significant connection here between a guilty conscience and hate. How is it that a guilty conscience leads to a loss of love? It does so by causing us to approach people with a deficit, an empty place that we want them to fill for us. The result is to use people rather than love them.

Let's think of some examples of this. How would a good conscience bring love to our Philadelphia driver above who is bent on retaliation? Why would a person jump all over another for an unintentional mistake? I think that it is our own guilt that leads us to jump on others for their sin. We make a big deal of the sins of others as a way to keep the attention off our own sin.

How about the troubled marriage? Can believing in sound doctrine help a husband and wife learn to love one another through providing them with a cleansed conscience? Consider the starting point of a marital fight over a small matter, like a husband who leaves the toilet seat up after using it instead of submitting to his wife's request to close it. After a lifelong habit of leaving it up, the husband often forgets to close it. His wife may wrongly interpret his omission as proof that he really doesn't love her. But she can't bear that thought because she has placed her identity in her husband's love. So she starts to nag him about this. He has placed his identity in being right, and her constant reminders to him that he is wrong lead him to greater defensiveness and his own misinterpretations of his wife. Both need to take a step back and experience the fullness that comes from believing the truth of the gospel. Our identity is found in what Jesus has accomplished in our behalf. The cleansing of our sins and the gift of a new identity are complete in him. Receiving that results in a new ability to love. To lose sound doctrine is to lose love.

### **III. The Place of the Law in Doctrinal Purity**

In the last section of our passage, Paul deals extensively with the place of the law. He does so because the drift away from sound doctrine almost always includes a wrong view of the law. These false teachers focused much of their attention on speculative details of the law, and Paul wants to remind Timothy of the true purpose of the law. The Protestant Reformers spent a good deal of effort

trying to understand this. Luther and Calvin listed three purposes of the law of God, such as is found in the Ten Commandments. First, it shows us our sin and our need of Christ and a need of a Savior. Apart from the law, our tendency is like the person who shoots the arrow at the target and then draws the bull's eye around the arrow. In other words, our natural opinion is that if I do it, it must be right. The law disrupts that tendency with an objective statement of what is right. Second, the law, through its penalties, restrains the evil hearts of sinners so that community life is possible. A person who would like to steal your property will restrain himself out of fear of being caught and of suffering the penalty for theft. Third, the law is for believers, in order that they might be instructed about the kind of life that delights the heart of God.

Paul is obviously talking about the second purpose of the law in this passage. He says that it is for the lawless and disobedient. Those whose hearts have been changed by faith in God, a faith that is true to sound doctrine, don't need this purpose of the law. For example, a normal parent doesn't need a law that says, "You shall not abuse your children by making them work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in order to provide you with the luxury car you've been wanting." Parents who love their children have no need of a law telling them not to do that because they find such behavior repulsive. Paul's clear assumption is that it is the power of the gospel that transforms our hearts, teaching us to love. It is the gospel that has the power truly to change the world, and that's why Paul was so zealous to protect sound doctrine. Take away the truth of the gospel, and you lose the most precious and powerful thing in the world.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Our need is to remember the gospel and not to swerve from it. That's what happened to the church in Ephesus. **"Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away"** (1:6). They didn't overtly renounce the gospel, but just began to see other things as more significant. They became bored with the gospel. Let us be careful not to do the same. Remember that in Jesus, you have been blessed with every spiritual blessing right now. Sins are cleansed in him. God rejoices over you with singing, not because of what you bring to the table, but because of what Jesus has brought to the table. Remember the grace of God. The grace of God doesn't mean God's unmerited favor. That's an erroneous and unbiblical definition. God's favor toward you is certainly merited. It's just merited by Jesus rather than by you. God is not cutting you a break when he forgives you and treats you as his child. He is giving you what Jesus has earned on your behalf. He is glad to do so, because the Father and the Son have conspired together to undertake a rescue operation for sinful men and women. Let us hold on to these truths with all we have.