

FOOL'S

GOLD?

DISCERNING TRUTH IN AN AGE OF ERROR

JOHN MACARTHUR

GENERAL EDITOR

NATHAN BUSENITZ, SCOTT LANG, PHIL JOHNSON

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

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# ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Nathan Busenitz** is the director of the *Shepherds' Fellowship* (a non-denominational association of churches spearheaded by Grace Community Church) as well as an adjunct faculty member at The Master's College & Seminary. In addition, he is the managing editor of *Pulpit*, the online magazine of the *Shepherds' Fellowship*. Nathan graduated from The Master's Seminary in 2002. He and his wife, Bethany, have two children, Ashley and Isaac. Nathan is also the author of *Living a Life of Hope* (Barbour Books, 2003).

**Dan Dumas** serves as executive pastor of Grace Community Church as well as pastor of the Cornerstone fellowship group (a ministry to young marrieds and families). He also oversees conferences and conference planning. Dan graduated from The Master's Seminary in 2001. Before coming to Grace Church, Dan served as college and singles pastor at the Westside Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, and Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama. He and his wife, Jane, have one son, Aidan.

**Kurt Gebhards** shepherds The Foundry (Grace Church's ministry to single adults in their twenties and thirties) as well as directing Logos Equipping Ministries (Grace Church's Bible institute for laymen). Kurt earned his Master of Divinity degree in 2001 and his Master of Theology degree in 2004, both from The Master's Seminary. Kurt and his wife, Julie, have three children—Reilly, Shea, and McKinley.

**Daniel Gillespie** is the director of the Shepherds' Conference (Grace Church's annual pastors' conference) and the Expositor's Institute (Grace Church's annual finishing school for preachers). Before moving to California, Daniel was involved in campus ministry at North Carolina State University. Daniel graduated from the Master's Seminary in 2004. He and his wife, Lisa, have one son, Jacob.

**Carey Hardy** serves as senior executive pastor at Grace Community Church and personal assistant to John MacArthur. He also pastors the Mainstream fellowship group (a ministry to young marrieds and families). In addition, he is an adjunct professor at The Master's College and Seminary, having graduated from The Master's Seminary in 1996. Before coming to Grace Church, Carey was a Christian school principal and minister of music in Texas. He and his wife, Pam, have four children—Christen, Nathan, Luke, and Catherine.

**Rick Holland** is the director of student ministries as well as the college pastor at Grace Community Church. He has served in youth ministry for twenty-two years and teaches as an adjunct professor of youth ministries at The Master's College. He is also the director of the Doctor of Ministries program at The Master's Seminary. Having earned his Master of Divinity degree from The Master's Seminary (1994), Rick completed his doctoral studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (D.Min.) in 2003. Rick and his wife, Kim, have three sons—Luke, John, and Mark.

**Phil Johnson** is the executive director of "Grace to You" (the Christian tape and radio ministry of John MacArthur) as well as the pastor of the Grace Life fellowship group (a ministry to families at Grace Church). In addition, he is the executive editor of *Pulpit*, the online magazine of the Shepherds' Fellowship. Phil has been closely associated with John MacArthur's ministry since 1981 and edits most of his major books. Before moving to California, Phil was an associate pastor in Florida and an editor for Moody Press. Phil and his wife, Darlene, have three sons—Jeremiah, Jedidiah, and Jonathan.

**John MacArthur** has been pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church since 1969. He is president of The Master's College and Seminary, is heard daily on "Grace to You," a nationally syndicated radio broadcast, and has authored nearly 100 books. He and his wife, Patricia, have four children (Matthew, Marcy, Mark, and Melinda) and thirteen grandchildren.

# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

*John MacArthur*

A WOMAN ONCE WROTE ME to say she thought Christianity was fine, but personally she was “into Zen.” She liked to listen to Christian radio while she was driving because the music “smoothed out her karma.” Occasionally, however, she would tune in one of the Bible-teaching ministries. In her opinion, all the preachers she heard were too narrow-minded toward other religions, so she was writing several radio ministers to encourage them to be more broad-minded.

“God doesn’t care *what* you believe, as long as you’re sincere,” she wrote, echoing an opinion I have heard many times. “All religions lead ultimately to the same reality. It doesn’t matter which road you take to get there, as long as you follow your chosen road faithfully. Don’t be critical of the alternative roads other people choose.”

To those who accept the Bible as God’s Word, the folly of that thinking should be immediately evident. If the consequences of what we believe mean the difference between right and wrong, God’s pleasure and His punishment, life and death, then we must make sure that what we’re believing is based on clear thinking. Put another way, we need to exercise discernment.

To be sure, discernment is about as fashionable to today’s culture as absolute truth and humility. Making clear distinctions and judgments contradicts the relativistic values of modern culture. Pluralism and diversity have been enshrined as higher virtues than truth. We’re not supposed to draw any definitive lines or declare any absolutes.

That is regarded as backward, outmoded, discourteous. And while this attitude toward biblical discernment is expected from the secular world, it is sadly being embraced by an increasing segment of evangelical Christianity.

As a result, evangelicalism is beginning to lose its distinctiveness—often choosing tolerance over truth. Not that most evangelicals would accept Islam, Hinduism, or other overtly non-Christian religions. But many seem to think it doesn't really matter what you believe, as long as you label it Christianity. With the exception of a few cults that blatantly renounce the Trinity, almost everything taught in the name of Christ is accepted by evangelicals—from Roman Catholicism (which denies that sinners are justified solely by faith) to the extreme charismatic Word Faith movement (which both corrupts the doctrine of Christ and makes temporal health and wealth the focus of salvation).

In the name of unity, such matters of doctrine are expressly *not* supposed to be contested. We are encouraged to insist on nothing more than a simple affirmation of faith in Jesus. Beyond that, the specific *content* of faith is supposed to be a matter of individual preference.

Of course, this general attitude of acceptance is not new; the church has waged an ongoing struggle over the issue of doctrinal discernment at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. This very same appeal for broad-mindedness in religious standards and beliefs has always been at the heart of the agenda of theological liberalism; indeed, it is precisely what the term *liberal* originally meant. What is new about today's appeals for tolerance is that they come from within the evangelical camp.

Nothing is more desperately needed in the church right now than a new movement to reemphasize the need for biblical discernment. Without such a movement, the true church is in serious trouble. If the current hunger for ecumenical compromise, pragmatic sanctification, and numerical success continues to gain a foothold within evangelicalism, it will result in an unmitigated spiritual disaster.

This book, then, is a plea for discernment. It is a reminder that God's truth is a precious commodity that must be handled care-

fully—not diluted with whimsical beliefs or bound up in human traditions. When churches, or individual Christians, lose their resolve to discern between sound doctrine and error, between good and evil, between truth and lies, they open themselves up to every kind of error. But those who apply biblical discernment consistently, in every area of life, are sure to walk in the wisdom of the Lord (Prov 2:1-6).

In contrast, today's Christians soothe themselves with the opinion that few things are really black and white. Doctrinal issues, moral questions, and Christian principles are all cast in hues of gray. Every person is encouraged to do what is right in his own eyes—exactly what God forbade (cf. Deut 12:8; Judg 17:6; 21:25).

The church will never manifest its power in society until we regain a passionate love for truth and a corollary hatred for error. True Christians cannot condone or disregard anti-Christian influences in their midst and expect to enjoy God's blessing. "Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Rom 13:11-12). Thus, "it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:9-11).

# ALL THAT GLITTERS . . . : A CALL FOR BIBLICAL DISCERNMENT<sup>1</sup>

*John MacArthur*

*This chapter lays the foundation for biblical discernment—a foundation that is of crucial importance, and yet often overlooked in our postmodern culture. Each subsequent chapter in this book builds on this foundation, applying the principles found here to a number of current Christian trends. In an age of open-mindedness, too many believers have forfeited biblical clarity and exchanged it for a life of confusion and compromise. They accept too much with too little discernment. But God’s Word makes it clear that not everything that glitters is true gold; doctrinal error abounds at every turn, the temptation to embrace it is great, and the stakes involved are eternal. God calls us, as His people, to distinguish what’s good from what’s bad. And that’s why we need biblical discernment.*

Eureka!

It is a simple Greek word, only six letters long. But for a generation of treasure seekers in the late 1840s, it became a life slogan. Meaning “I have found it!” in English, the term purportedly comes from Archimedes, the Greek mathematician who cried out “Eureka! Eureka!” when he determined how much gold was in King Hiero’s crown. Yet, for James Marshall (who discovered gold at Sutter’s Mill

in 1848) and many of his contemporaries, the term took on new meaning. For them, “eureka” meant instant riches, early retirement, and a life of carefree ease. It’s no wonder California (the “Golden State”) includes this term on its official seal, along with the picture of a zealous gold miner.

News of Marshall’s discovery spread quickly throughout the nation. By 1850 over 75,000 hopefuls had traveled to California by land, and another 40,000 by sea. Whether by wagon or by boat, the journey was an arduous one, as adventurers left friends and family behind in search of vast fortunes. Even when they finally arrived in San Francisco, the closest goldfields were still 150 miles away. Undaunted nonetheless, many of the forty-niners set up mining camps and started to dig.

As they traveled out to their various destinations, prospectors quickly learned that not everything that looked like gold actually was. Riverbeds and rock quarries could be full of golden specks, and yet entirely worthless. This “fool’s gold” was iron pyrite, and miners had to be able to distinguish it from the real thing. Their very livelihood depended on it.

Experienced miners could usually distinguish pyrite from gold simply by looking at it. But in some cases the distinction was not quite so clear. So they developed tests to discern what was genuine from what wasn’t. One test involved biting the rock in question. Real gold is softer than the human tooth, while fool’s gold is harder. A broken tooth meant that a prospector needed to keep digging. A second test involved scraping the rock on a piece of white stone, such as ceramic. True gold leaves a yellow streak, while the residue left by fool’s gold is greenish-black. In either case, a miner relied on tests to authenticate his finds—both his fortune and his future depended on the results.

Doctrinally speaking, today’s church is in a similar position to the California gold rushers of 1850. Spiritual riches are promised at every turn. New programs, new philosophies, new parachurch ministries—each glitters a little bit more than the last, promising better results and bigger returns. But, as was true in the mid-1800s, just

because it glitters doesn't mean it's good. Christians need to be equally wary of "fool's gold." We must not accept new trends (or old traditions) without first testing them to see if they meet with God's approval. If they fail the test, we should discard them and warn others also. But if they pass the test, in keeping with the truth of God's Word, we can embrace and endorse them wholeheartedly.

California gold miners would only cry "Eureka!" when they found true gold. As Christians, we should be careful to do the same.

## OUR NEED FOR DISCERNMENT

In considering nineteenth-century miners, we are reminded of the need to discriminate between truth and falsehood. In modern usage, the word *discrimination* carries powerful negative connotations. But the word itself is not negative. *Discriminate* simply means "to make a clear distinction." We used to call someone "a discriminating person" if he or she exercised keen judgment. "Discrimination" signified a positive ability to draw the line between good and evil, true and false, right and wrong. In the heyday of the American civil rights movement the word was widely applied to racial bigotry. And, indeed, people who make unfair distinctions between races are guilty of an evil form of discrimination.

Unfortunately, the word itself took on that negative connotation, and the sinister implication is often transferred to anyone who tries to discriminate in any way. To view homosexuality as immoral (1 Cor 6:9-10; 1 Tim 1:9-10) is condemned now by the politically correct as an unacceptable form of discrimination. To suggest that wives ought to submit to their own husbands (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18) is now classified as unfair discrimination. To suggest that children ought to obey their parents (Eph 6:1) is also labeled unjust discrimination by some. Anyone who "discriminates" in these ways risks becoming a target of lawsuits by the ACLU.

The idea of discrimination itself has fallen out of favor. We are not supposed to draw lines. We are not supposed to discriminate.

That is the spirit of this age, and unfortunately, it has crept into the church.

If we are going to be discerning people, we must develop the skill of discriminating between truth and error, good and bad. The original languages of Scripture convey this very idea. The main Hebrew word for “discernment” is *bin*. The word and its variants are used hundreds of times in the Old Testament. It is often translated “discernment,” “understanding,” “skill,” or “carefulness.” But in the original language it conveys the same idea as our word *discrimination*. It entails the idea of making distinctions. Jay Adams points out that the word *bin* “is related to the noun *bayin*, which means ‘interval’ or ‘space between,’ and the preposition *ben*, ‘between.’ In essence it means to separate things from one another at their points of difference in order to distinguish them.”<sup>2</sup> *Discernment*, then, is a synonym for *discrimination*. In fact, the Greek verb translated “discern” in the New Testament is *diakrinō*. It means, “to make a distinction” and is literally translated that way in Acts 15:9.

So discernment is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking about truth. The discerning person is the one who draws a clear contrast between truth and error. Discernment is black-and-white thinking—the conscious refusal to color every issue in shades of gray. No one can be truly discerning without developing skill in separating divine truth from error.

Does Scripture tell us *how* to be discerning? It certainly does. Paul sums up the process in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22: “test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.” There, in three straightforward commands, he spells out the requirements of a discerning mind.

## JUDGE EVERYTHING

Let’s quickly set the context for this passage. Starting with verse 16, Paul lists some very brief reminders to the Thessalonian Christians. These might be thought of as the basics of Christian living: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this

is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies.” Rejoicing, prayer, contentment, responsiveness to the preaching of God’s Word—those are all primary duties of every Christian.

Another duty is discernment. “Test everything” (v. 21) is a call to discernment. It is significant that Paul sets discernment in a context of very basic commands. It is as crucial to the effective Christian life as prayer and contentment.

That may surprise some Christians who see discernment as uniquely a pastoral responsibility. It is certainly true that pastors and elders have an even greater duty to be discerning than the average layperson. Most of the calls to discernment in the New Testament are issued to church leaders (1 Tim 4:6-7, 13, 16; Titus 1:9). Every elder is required to be skilled in teaching truth and able to refute unsound doctrine. As a pastor, I am constantly aware of this responsibility. Everything I read, for example, goes through a grid of discrimination in my mind. If you were to look through my library, you would instantly be able to identify which books I have read. The margins are marked. Sometimes you’ll see approving remarks and heavy underlining. Other times you’ll find question marks—or even red lines through the text. I constantly strive to separate truth from error. I read that way, I think that way, and of course I preach that way. My passion is to know the truth and proclaim it with authority. That should be the passion of every elder, because everything we teach affects the hearts and lives of those who hear us. It is an awesome responsibility. Any church leader who does not feel the burden of this duty ought to step down from leadership.

But discernment is not *only* the duty of pastors and elders. The same careful discernment Paul demanded of pastors and elders is also the duty of every Christian. First Thessalonians 5:21 is written to the *entire church*: “Examine everything carefully” (NASB).

The Greek text is by no means complex. The word “carefully” has been added by the translators to make the sense clear. If we translate the phrase literally, we find it simply says, “Examine everything.” But the idea conveyed by our word *carefully* is included

in the Greek word translated “examine,” *dokimazō*. This is a familiar word in the New Testament. Elsewhere it is translated “analyze,” “test,” or “prove.” It refers to the process of testing something to reveal its genuineness, such as in the testing of precious metals. Paul is urging believers to scrutinize everything they hear to see that it is genuine, to distinguish between the true and the false, to separate the good from the evil. In other words, he wants them to examine everything *critically*. “Test everything,” he is saying. “Judge everything.”

Wait a minute. What about Matthew 7:1 (“Judge not, that you be not judged”)? Typically someone will quote that verse and suggest that it rules out any kind of critical or analytical appraisal of what others believe. Was Jesus forbidding Christians from judging what is taught in His name?

Obviously not. The spiritual discernment Paul calls for is different from the judgmental attitude Jesus forbade. In Matthew 7, Jesus went on to say,

*For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (vv. 2-5)*

Obviously, what Jesus condemned was the hypocritical judgment of those who held others to a higher standard than they themselves were willing to live by. He was certainly not suggesting that *all* judgment is forbidden. In fact, Jesus indicated that taking a speck out of your brother's eye is the *right* thing to do—if you first get the log out of your own eye.

Elsewhere in Scripture we are forbidden to judge others' motives or attitudes. We are not able to discern “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). That is a divine prerogative. Only God can

judge the heart, because only God can see it (1 Sam 16:7). He alone knows the secrets of the heart (Ps 44:21). He alone can weigh the motives (Prov 16:2). And He alone “will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Rom 2:16). That is not our role. “Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart” (1 Cor 4:5).

What is forbidden is hypocritical judging and judging others’ thoughts and motives. But other forms of judgment are explicitly commanded. Throughout Scripture the people of God are urged to judge between truth and error, right and wrong, good and evil. Jesus said, “Judge with right judgment” (John 7:24). Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, “I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say” (1 Cor 10:15). Clearly, God *requires* us to be discriminating when it comes to matters of sound doctrine.

We are also supposed to judge one another with regard to overt acts of sin. Paul wrote, “Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you’” (1 Cor 5:12-13). That speaks of the same process of discipline outlined by Jesus Himself in Matthew 18:15-20.

At least one other kind of judgment is expressly required of every believer. We must examine and judge our own selves: “if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged” (1 Cor 11:31). This calls for a careful searching and judging of our own hearts. Paul called for this self-examination every time we partake of the Lord’s Supper (v. 28). All other righteous forms of judgment depend on this honest self-examination. That is what Jesus meant when He said, “first take the log out of your own eye” (Luke 6:42).

Clearly, then, the command in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, “Test everything,” in no way contradicts the biblical strictures against being judgmental. The discernment called for here is *doctrinal* discernment. The conjunction at the beginning of this verse—“*but* test everything”—ties it to the “prophecies” mentioned in verse 20.

A prophecy was not necessarily a new revelation. The gift of prophecy in the New Testament has to do more with *proclaiming* the

Word of God than with *obtaining* it. In the context of this passage, it clearly has to do with any spiritual message that the Thessalonians received—any message that claimed to carry divine approval or authority.

The unusually gullible Thessalonians seemed to have a problem in this regard. Like many today, they were eager to believe whatever was preached in the name of Christ. They were indiscriminating. That's why Paul addresses this continual lack of discernment in both of his Thessalonian epistles. There is evidence in the first epistle, for example, that someone had confused the Thessalonians about the return of Christ. They were going through a time of severe persecution, and apparently some of them thought they had missed the Second Coming. In chapter 3 we learn that Paul had sent Timothy from Athens specifically to strengthen and encourage them in their faith (v. 2). They were unaccountably confused about why they were being persecuted. Paul had to remind them, "you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction" (vv. 3-4). Evidently someone had also taught them that believers who died before the Second Coming of Christ would miss that event entirely. They were in serious confusion. Chapters 4-5 contain Paul's efforts to correct that confusion. He tells them that the dead in Christ will rise and be caught up with the living (4:16-17). And he assures them that although that day will come like a thief in the night (5:2), they need not fear being caught off guard (vv. 3-6).

Incredibly, shortly after this, Paul had to write a second epistle, *again* assuring the Thessalonians that they had not missed some great event on the prophetic calendar. Someone, it seems, had sent them a counterfeit epistle claiming to be from Paul and suggesting that the day of the Lord had come already. They should not have been duped by such a ploy because Paul had written so plainly in his first epistle. He wrote them again: "Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a

spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you” (2 Thess 2:1-3). There was no excuse for their chronic gullibility.

Why were they so vulnerable to false teaching? Surely it was precisely because they lacked biblical discernment. The Thessalonians did not examine everything in light of God’s Word. If they had, they would not have been so easily hoodwinked. And that is why Paul urged them, “Test everything.”

It is fair to point out that the Thessalonians were at a disadvantage compared to Christians today. They did not have all the written books of New Testament Scripture. Paul wrote these two epistles to Thessalonica very early in the New Testament era—about A.D. 51. The two letters were probably written only a few months apart and are among the very earliest of all the New Testament writings. The Thessalonians’ primary source of authoritative gospel truth was Paul’s teaching. As an apostle, Paul taught with absolute authority. When he taught them, his message *was* the Word of God, and he commended them for recognizing that: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13). Elsewhere he said that the commandments he gave them were by the authority of the Lord Jesus (4:2).

The *substance* of what he taught them represented the same body of truth that is available to us in the New Testament Scriptures. How do we know? Paul himself said so. Even as he was recording his inspired epistle to them, he reminded them, “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?” (2 Thess 2:5). The written Word simply confirmed and recorded for all time the authoritative truth he had already taught them in person. These epistles were a written reminder of what they had already heard from Paul’s own mouth (1 Thess 4:2).

Second Thessalonians 2:15 confirms this: “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” There he declares, first of all, that his epis-

tles to them are authoritative, inspired truth. This verse is a clear statement that Paul himself regarded these epistles as inspired Scripture.

But notice also that this verse joins the apostolic “traditions” with the written Word of God. The “traditions” necessary for Christians to be discerning are recorded for all ages in the text of Scripture. Those who claim that apostolic tradition is *other truth in addition to* Scripture often attempt to use this verse for support. Note, however, that Paul is not saying “the traditions [they] were taught” are *different* from the written Scriptures. Rather he links the two, affirming that the written Word of God is the only permanent and authoritative record of the apostolic tradition. He is specifically suggesting that the Thessalonians should not trust “word of mouth” or letters pretending to be from apostolic sources. Only what they had heard firsthand from Paul’s own lips or read in authentic letters from him were they to treat as authoritative divine truth. That is why Paul usually signed his epistles “with [his] own hand” (1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17; Philem 19).

With this in mind, 2 Thessalonians 2:15 cannot be used to support the claim that extrabiblical, spiritually binding “apostolic tradition” is passed down verbally through popes and bishops. Paul’s whole point was that the Thessalonians should treat as authoritative only what they had heard from his own mouth or received from his own pen. That body of truth—the Word of God—was to be the measuring stick they used to examine all things. Two other verses confirm this. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6 Paul writes, “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” And in verse 14 he adds, “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.”

Therefore, Paul is affirming that the Bible is the only reliable criterion by which believers in this age can evaluate any message claiming to be truth from God.

## CLING TO WHAT IS GOOD

The testing of truth Paul calls for is not merely an academic exercise. It demands an active, twofold response. First there is a positive response to whatever is good: “Hold fast what is good” (1 Thess 5:21). This is an echo of Romans 12:9: “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” The expressions “hold fast” or “cling to” (NASB) speak of jealously safeguarding the truth. Paul is calling for the same careful watchfulness he demanded of Timothy every time he wrote him: “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you” (1 Tim 6:20); “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me. . . . By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim 1:13-14). In other words, the truth is given into our custody, and we are charged with guarding it against every possible threat.

This describes a militant, defensive, protective stance against anything that undermines the truth or does violence to it in any way. We must hold the truth securely, defend it zealously, preserve it from all threats. To placate the enemies of truth or lower our guard is to violate this command.

“Hold fast” also carries the idea of embracing something. It goes beyond bare assent to “that which is good” and speaks of loving the truth wholeheartedly. Those who are truly discerning are passionately committed to sound doctrine, to truth, and to all that is inspired by God.

Every true Christian has this quality to some degree. Paul even defined salvation as “lov[ing] the truth” (2 Thess 2:10), and he told the Corinthians they proved their salvation by holding fast to the gospel he had delivered (1 Cor 15:2). Those who utterly fail to hold fast to the saving message are those who have “believed in vain”; that is, their faith was empty to begin with. The apostle John said something similar: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19). All true believers hold fast to the gospel.

Paul was urging the Thessalonians to nurture and cultivate their love for truth, to let it rule their thinking. He wanted them to foster a conscious commitment to *all* truth, a faithfulness to sound doctrine, a pattern of holding fast to all that is good.

The attitude this calls for is incompatible with the suggestion that we should lay doctrine aside for the sake of unity. It cannot be reconciled with the opinion that hard truths should be downplayed to make God's Word more palatable for unbelievers. It is contrary to the notion that personal experience takes precedence over objective truth. God has given us His truth objectively in His Word. It is a treasure that we should protect at all costs.

This is the opposite of undiscerning faith. Paul leaves no room for rote tradition. He makes no place for a blind, irrational faith that refuses to consider the authenticity of its object and just accepts at face value everything that claims to be true. He rules out the kind of "faith" that is driven by feelings, emotion, and the human imagination. Instead, we are to identify "what is good" by examining everything carefully, objectively, rationally—using Scripture as our standard.

No human teacher, no personal experience, no strong feeling is exempt from this objective test. Jay Adams writes, "If inspired prophecies in the apostolic age had to be subjected to testing . . . then surely the teachings of men today should also be put to the test."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, if the words of prophets in apostolic times needed to be examined and evaluated, then surely we ought to subject the words of self-proclaimed "prophets" and preachers today to even more intense scrutiny in the bright light of the completed New Testament. The same is true of every subjective experience and every emotion. Experience and feelings—no matter how powerful—do not determine what is true. Rather, those things themselves must be subjected to the test.

"That which is good" is truth that accords with God's Word. The word "good" is *kalos*, meaning something that is inherently good. It isn't just something that is fair to look at, lovely or beautiful in appearance. This speaks of something good in itself—genuine, true, noble,

right, and good. In other words, “that which is good” does not refer to that which is entertaining. It does not refer to that which garners accolades from the world. It does not refer to that which is satisfying to the flesh. It refers to that which is good, true, accurate, authentic, dependable—that which is in agreement with the infallible Word of God.

When you find such truth, embrace it and guard it like a treasure.

## SHUN WHAT IS EVIL

The other side of Paul’s command is a negative response to evil: “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess 5:22). The word translated “abstain” is a very strong verb, *apechō*, meaning “hold oneself back,” “keep away from,” “shun.” It is the same word used in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “abstain from sexual immorality,” and 1 Peter 2:11, “abstain from the passions of the flesh.” It calls for a radical separation from “every form of evil.” This would include evil behavior, of course. But in this context, the primary reference seems to be evil teaching—false doctrine. Having examined everything in light of God’s Word, when you identify something that does not measure up—something that is evil, untrue, erroneous, or contrary to sound doctrine—shun it.

Scripture does not give believers permission to expose themselves to evil. Some people believe the only way to defend against false doctrine is to study it, become proficient in it, and master all its nuances—then refute it. I know people who study the cults more than they study sound doctrine. Some Christians immerse themselves in the philosophy, entertainment, and culture of society. They feel such a strategy will strengthen their witness to unbelievers.

But the emphasis of that strategy is all wrong. Our focus should be on knowing the *truth*. Error is to be shunned.

Granted, we cannot recede into a monastic existence to escape exposure to every evil influence. But neither are we supposed to be experts about evil. The apostle Paul wrote, “I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil” (Rom 16:19).

Federal agents don’t learn to spot counterfeit money by studying

the counterfeits. They study genuine bills until they master the look of the real thing. Then when they see bogus money they recognize it. Detecting a spiritual counterfeit requires the same discipline. Master the truth to refute error. Don't spend time studying error; shun it. Study truth. Hold fast the faithful Word. Then you will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9). As Paul wrote elsewhere, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21).

In the King James Version, 1 Thessalonians 5:22 is translated "abstain from all *appearance* of evil." The word translated "appearance" is *eidos*, literally "that which is seen." The *New American Standard Bible* and *English Standard Version* translation, "every *form* of evil," gives the better sense. We are to reject evil however it appears, to shun every manifestation of it.

This explicitly rules out *syncretism*. Syncretism is the practice of blending ideas from different religions and philosophies. I remember meeting a man once who compared his view of spirituality to a quilt—different ideas from different religions made up his own personal patchwork of faith. He devoured materials from every cult and denomination, looking for good in all of it. Whatever he deemed good, he absorbed for his belief system. He was designing his own unique religion based on syncretism.

That man might attempt to use 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to justify his methodology: "test everything; hold fast what is good." That is, after all, precisely what he thought he was doing. But he was actually doing the opposite of what this passage demands. Verse 21 is balanced by verse 22: "Abstain from every form of evil."

The only proper response to false teaching is to shun it. Erroneous doctrine is no place to look for truth. There is usually *some* point of truth even in rank heresy. But it is truth out of balance, corrupted truth, truth mixed with lies and therefore rendered dangerous. Shun it.

Satan is subtle. He often sabotages the truth by mixing it with error. Truth mixed with error is usually far more effective and far more destructive than a straightforward contradiction of the truth.

If you think everything you read or hear on Christian radio and television is reliable teaching, then you are a prime target for doctrinal deception. If you think everyone who *appears* to love the truth really does, then you don't understand the wiles of Satan. "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light," Paul wrote. "So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor 11:14-15).

Satan also disguises his lies as truth. He doesn't always wage war openly against the gospel. He is much more likely to attack the church by infiltrating with subtle error. He uses the Trojan horse stratagem by placing his false teachers *in the church*, where they can "secretly bring in destructive heresies" (2 Pet 2:1). He puts his lies in the mouth of someone who claims to speak for Jesus Christ—someone likable and appealing; then he spreads his perverse lies in the church where they can draw away Christ's disciples (Acts 20:30). He attaches Bible verses to his lies (Matt 4:6). He uses deception and hypocrisy. He disguises falsehood as truth. He loves syncretism. It makes evil *look* good.

That's why we are to examine *everything* carefully and shun whatever is unsound, corrupt, or erroneous. It is deadly. Millions in the church today are being overwhelmed by the Trojan-horse ploy calling for the integration of secular ideas with biblical truth. Others are easily duped by anything labeled Christian. They don't examine everything. They don't hold fast to the truth. And they won't shun evil. They are left vulnerable to false doctrine and have no defense against theological confusion.

## THE REASON FOR THIS BOOK

The apostle Paul's clear teaching in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 cannot simply be avoided or ignored. As in the days of the early church, doctrinal error is all around us. Often it looks very good—that's why so many fall prey to its deception. And that is also why God gave us His Word, so that we would have a measuring stick by which to examine every spiritual or theological message we encounter.

In the ensuing chapters, this book will address several contemporary Christian issues in light of God's revealed truth. The goal in doing so is not to be unloving, but rather to preserve that which is "first pure, then peaceable" (Jas 3:17). In fact, Scripture makes it clear that this type of examination is inherently loving, as God's people are called to think biblically and exercise discernment. To do anything less will only result in spiritual anemia (cf. Hos 4:6).

My prayer for you, as you encounter any doctrinal teaching, is that you would be like the Bereans who were more noble because they were "examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

# PLEXIGLAS PREACHING: THE DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES OF A WATERED-DOWN MESSAGE

*John MacArthur*

*Having established the importance of discernment in Chapter 1, this chapter addresses its absence in contemporary Christianity. It is an examination of the major reasons discernment is so scarce in today's church. The culprit is watered-down preaching. Hosea 4:6 records God's estimation of spiritual leaders who fail to faithfully proclaim His message: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me." A quick survey of modern preaching reveals that many contemporary pulpits deserve similar assessments. Why? It is because they have exchanged the full counsel of God for doctrinally shallow, seeker-friendly "talks." When warm and fuzzy moral messages, peppered with cute anecdotes and an occasional skit, replace the meat of God's Word, the consequences are devastating. This chapter, which originally appeared as an article in Pulpit magazine, outlines the disastrous results of Plexiglas pulpits and the messages they represent.*

Those who are familiar with my ministry know that I am committed to expository preaching. It is my unshakable conviction that the proclamation of God's Word should always be the heart and the focus of the church's ministry (2 Tim 4:2). And proper biblical preaching should be systematic, expositional, theological, and God-centered.

Such preaching is in short supply these days. There are plenty of gifted communicators in the modern evangelical movement, but today's sermons tend to be short, shallow, topical homilies that massage people's egos and focus on fairly insipid subjects like human relationships, "successful" living, emotional issues, and other practical but worldly—and not definitively *biblical*—themes. Like the ubiquitous Plexiglas lecterns from which these messages are delivered, such preaching is lightweight and without substance, cheap and synthetic, leaving little more than an ephemeral impression on the minds of the hearers.

Some time ago I hosted a discussion at the Expositors' Institute, an annual small-group colloquium on preaching held at our church. In preparation for that seminar, I took a yellow legal pad and a pen and began listing the negative effects of the superficial brand of preaching that is so rife in modern evangelicalism.

I initially thought I might be able to identify about ten, but in the end I had jotted down a list of sixty-one devastating consequences. I've distilled them to fifteen by combining and eliminating all but the most crucial ones. I offer them as a warning against superficial, marginally-biblical preaching—both to those who stand behind the pulpit and to those who sit in the pew.

**1. It usurps the authority of God over the soul.** Whether a preacher boldly proclaims the Word of God or not is ultimately a question of authority. Who has the right to speak to the church? The preacher or God? Whenever *anything* is substituted for the preaching of the Word, God's authority is usurped. What a prideful thing to do! In fact, it is hard to conceive of anything more insolent that could be done by a man who is called by God to preach.

**2. It removes the lordship of Christ from His church.** Who is the Head of the church? Is Christ really the dominant teaching

authority in the church? If so, then why are there so many churches where His Word is not being faithfully proclaimed? When we look at contemporary ministry, we see programs and methods that are the fruit of human invention, the offspring of opinion polls and neighborhood surveys, and other pragmatic artifices. Church-growth experts have in essence wrested control of the church's agenda from her true Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Puritan forefathers resisted the imposition of government-imposed liturgies for precisely this reason: They saw it as a direct attack on the headship of Christ over His own church. Modern preachers who neglect the Word of God have yielded the ground those men fought and sometimes died for. When Jesus Christ is exalted among His people, His power is manifest in the church. When the church is commandeered by compromisers who want to appease the culture, the gospel is minimized, true power is lost, artificial energy must be manufactured, and superficiality takes the place of truth.

**3. It hinders the work of the Holy Spirit.** What is the instrument the Spirit uses to do His work? The Word of God. He uses the Word as the instrument of regeneration (1 Pet 1:23; Jas 1:18). He also uses it as the means of sanctification (John 17:17). In fact, it is the *only* tool He uses (Eph 6:17). So when preachers neglect God's Word, they undermine the work of the Holy Spirit, producing shallow conversions and spiritually lame Christians—if not utterly spurious ones.

**4. It demonstrates appalling pride and a lack of submission.** In the modern approach to "ministry," the Word of God is deliberately downplayed, the reproach of Christ is quietly repudiated, the offense of the gospel is carefully eliminated, and "worship" is purposely tailored to fit the preferences of unbelievers. That is nothing but a *refusal* to submit to the biblical mandate for the church. The effrontery of ministers who pursue such a course is, to me, frightening.

**5. It severs the preacher personally from the regular sanctifying grace of Scripture.** The greatest personal benefit that I get from preaching is the work that the Spirit of God does on my own soul as I study and prepare for two expository messages each Lord's

day. Week by week the duty of careful exposition keeps my own heart focused and fixed on the Scriptures, and the Word of God nourishes me while I prepare to feed my flock. So I am personally blessed and spiritually strengthened through the enterprise. If for no other reason, I would never abandon biblical preaching. The enemy of our souls is after preachers in particular, and the sanctifying grace of the Word of God is critical to our protection.

**6. It clouds the true depth and transcendence of our message and therefore cripples both corporate and personal worship.** What passes for preaching in some churches today is literally no more profound than what preachers in our fathers' generation were teaching in the five-minute children's sermon they gave before dismissing the kids. That's no exaggeration. It is *often* that simplistic, if not utterly inane. There is nothing deep about it. Such an approach makes it impossible for true worship to take place, because worship is a transcendent experience. Worship should take us above the mundane and simplistic. So the only way true worship can occur is if we first come to grips with the depth of spiritual truth. Our people can only rise high in worship in the same proportion to which we have taken them deep into the profound truths of the Word. There is no way they can have lofty thoughts of God unless we have plunged them into the depths of God's self-revelation. But preaching today is neither profound nor transcendent. It doesn't go down, and it doesn't go up. It merely aims to entertain.

By the way, true worship is not something that can be stimulated artificially. A bigger, louder band and more sentimental music might do more to stir people's emotions. But that is not genuine worship. True worship is a response from the heart to God's *truth* (John 4:23). You can actually worship *without* music if you have seen the glories and the depth of what the Bible teaches.

**7. It prevents the preacher from fully developing the mind of Christ.** Pastors are supposed to be undershepherds of Christ. Too many modern preachers are so bent on understanding the culture that they develop the mind of the culture and not the mind of Christ. They start to think like the world, and not like the

Savior. Frankly, the nuances of worldly culture are virtually irrelevant to me. I want to know the mind of Christ and bring that to bear on the culture, no matter what culture I may be ministering to. If I'm going to stand up in a pulpit and be a representative of Jesus Christ, I want to know how *He* thinks—and that must be my message to His people too. The only way to know and proclaim the mind of Christ is by being faithful to study and preach His Word. What happens to preachers who obsess about cultural “relevancy” is that they become worldly, not godly.

**8. It depreciates by example the spiritual duty and priority of personal Bible study.** Is personal Bible study important? Of course. But what example does the preacher set when he neglects the Bible in his own preaching? Why would people think they need to study the Bible if the preacher doesn't do serious study himself in the preparation of his sermons? There is now a movement among some of the gurus of “seeker-sensitive” ministry to trim, as much as possible, all explicit references to the Bible from the sermon—and above all, don't ever ask your people to turn to a specific Bible passage because that kind of thing makes “seekers” uncomfortable. Some “seeker-sensitive” churches actively discourage their people from bringing Bibles to church lest the sight of so many Bibles intimidate the “seekers.” As if it were dangerous to give your people the impression that the Bible might be important!

**9. It prevents the preacher from being the voice of God on every issue of his time.** Jeremiah 8:9 says, “The wise men are ashamed, they are dismayed and taken. Behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord; so what wisdom do they have?” When I speak, I want to be *God's* messenger. I'm not interested in exegeting what some psychologist or business guru or college professor has to say about an issue. My people don't need my opinion; they need to hear what *God* has to say. If we preach as Scripture commands us, there should be no ambiguity about whose message is coming from the pulpit.

**10. It breeds a congregation that is as weak and indifferent to the glory of God as their pastor is.** “Seeker-sensitive” preach-

ing fosters people who are consumed with their own well-being. When you tell people that the church's primary ministry is to fix for them whatever is wrong in this life—to meet their needs, to help them cope with their worldly disappointments, and so on—the message you are sending is that their mundane problems are more important than the glory of God and the majesty of Christ. Again, that sabotages true worship.

**11. It robs people of their only true source of help.** People who sit under superficial preaching become dependent on the cleverness and the creativity of the speaker. When preachers punctuate their sermons with laser lights and smoke, video clips and live drama, the message they send is that there isn't a prayer the people in the pew could ever extract such profound material on their own. Such gimmicks create a kind of dispensing mechanism that people can't use to serve themselves. So they become spiritual couch potatoes who just come in to be entertained, and whatever superficial spiritual content they get from the preacher's weekly performance is *all* they will get. They have no particular interest in the Bible because the sermons they hear don't cultivate that. They are wowed by the preacher's creativity and manipulated by the music, and that becomes their whole perspective on spirituality.

**12. It encourages people to become indifferent to the Word of God and divine authority.** Predictably, in a church where the preaching of Scripture is neglected, it becomes impossible to get people to submit to the authority of Scripture. The preacher who always aims at meeting felt needs and strokes the conceit of worldly people has no platform from which to confront the man who wants to divorce his wife without cause. The man will say, "You don't understand what I *feel*. I came here because you promised to meet my felt needs. And I'm telling you, I don't feel like I want to live with this woman anymore." You can't inject biblical authority into that. You certainly wouldn't have an easy time pursuing church discipline. That is the monster that superficial preaching creates. But if you are going to try to deal with sin and apply any kind of authoritative principle to keep the church pure, you *must* be preaching the Word.

**13. It lies to people about what they really need.** In Jeremiah 8:11, God condemns the prophets who treated people's wounds superficially. That verse applies powerfully to the plastic preachers who populate so many prominent evangelical pulpits today. They omit the hard truths about sin and judgment. They tone down the offensive parts of Christ's message. They lie to people about what they really need, promising them "fulfillment" and earthly well-being when what people really need is an exalted vision of Christ and a true understanding of the splendor of God's holiness.

**14. It strips the pulpit of power.** "The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12). Everything else is impotent, giving merely an illusion of power. Human strategy is not more important than Scripture. The showman's ability to lure people in should not impress us more than the Bible's ability to transform lives.

**15. It puts the responsibility on the preacher to change people with his cleverness.** Preachers who pursue the modern approach to ministry must think they have the power to change people. That, too, is a frightening expression of pride. We preachers can't save people, and we can't sanctify them. We can't change people with our insights, our cleverness, by entertaining them or by appealing to their human whims and wishes and ambitions. There's only One who can change sinners. That's God, and He does it by His Spirit through the Word.

So pastors must preach the Word, even though it is currently out of fashion to do so (2 Tim 4:2). That is the only way their ministry can ever truly be fruitful. Moreover, it assures that they *will* be fruitful in ministry, because God's Word never returns to Him void; it always accomplishes that for which He sends it and prospers in what He sends it to do (Isa 55:11).

# NOTES

## Chapter 1

1. This chapter was adapted from Chapter 3 of *Reckless Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).
2. Jay E. Adams, *A Call to Discernment* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1987), 46.
3. *Ibid.*, 75.

## Chapter 3

1. Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002). “Purpose-Driven” is a registered trademark.
2. William Lobdell, “Pastor with a Purpose,” *The Seattle Times* (September 29, 2003): A3.
3. Warren does discuss some of these issues later in the book. However, it is surprising that he does not include them here (in Day 7), since this is the book’s primary gospel presentation.
4. This “deeper-life” emphasis seems to be outlined in Chapter 10 where Warren says, “The Bible is crystal clear about how you benefit when you *fully* surrender your life to God” (p. 82, emphasis added).
5. Bob DeWaay, “The Gospel: A Method or a Message?” *Critical Issues Commentary* (January/February 2004); [www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue80.htm](http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue80.htm).
6. Rick Warren, “An Interview with Rick Warren,” *Modern Reformation*, 13/1 (January/February 2004); [www.modernreformation.org](http://www.modernreformation.org).
7. It is recognized that this distinction (between doctrine and duty in Paul’s epistles) is somewhat artificial. In this case, however, it seems an appropriate description of a Pauline priority structure—where right living is a result of right theology.
8. DeWaay, “A Method or a Message?”
9. “Purpose-Driven Life,” Internet Discussion Forum (June 10, 2004); [www.livejournal.com/community/christianleft/51855.html](http://www.livejournal.com/community/christianleft/51855.html).
10. Although they are outside of the scope of this review, more complete evaluations of *The Purpose-Driven Church*, as well as the seeker-sensitive movement, are avail-