

The Quarterly Journal



THE NEWSLETTER PUBLICATION OF PERSONAL FREEDOM OUTREACH

VOL. 40, NO. 3

JULY-SEPTEMBER 2020

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Holding to a Pattern of Sound Doctrine What It Is and Why We Need It

by J. Greg Sheryl

Government agents learning to detect counterfeit money, the well-traveled story goes, do not examine counterfeit bills, but instead study the genuine article.

Although the Secret Service trains their agents using both counterfeit and genuine currency,¹ the rationale behind the incorrect but oft-reported story makes a valid point: To detect a counterfeit, one must be truly familiar with the genuine article.

The same can be said for detecting false or unsound doctrine.

WHAT IS SOUND DOCTRINE?

Doctrine is "teaching." The word "sound" can be understood as "free from error." Therefore sound doctrine is teaching that is free from error.

In the three pastoral epistles — 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus — the need for pastors to teach sound doctrine is emphasized (1 Timothy 1:10; 2 Timothy 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1).

Although the four references above use the phrase "sound doctrine," there are other verses that use the word "doctrine" which also indicate the importance of good teaching: Proverbs 4:2; Acts 2:42; Romans 6:17; 16:17; 1 Timothy 1:3; 4:6, 13, 16; 5:17; 6:3; 2 Timothy 3:10, 16; Titus 2:7, 10; and 2 John 1:9, 10. While 2 Timothy 1:13 does not use the word "doctrine," it appears to be speaking about sound doctrine.

Scripture mentions things that can be opposed to sound doctrine, such as "the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7; cf. Colossians 2:22); "the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:12); contrary doctrine, which causes divisions

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Editorials

THE END OF AN ERA

It's been said this side of eternity all good things must come to an end. The average career of a Major League Baseball player is only 5.6 years. And the career span of a player in the National Football League is even less at 2.5 years. Time and the depletion of physical energies always wins.

This year marks the 40th year of production of *The Quarterly Journal*, and as we conclude our publication year in the fall, Personal Freedom Outreach will cease printing its newsletter.

In the world of apologetic and discernment ministries, 40 consecutive years of publishing is quite an accomplishment. In addition, the *Journal* has been repeatedly applauded for its "well-written and researched articles." We have worked hard toward that end and strived to earn the respect we received. From thorough researching and informative writing of the articles, to meticulously checking the quotations and their references, to multi-level editing and proofreading, those responsible for the *Journal's* production have made a serious commitment to do the best job possible by using the time, talents, and gifts with which God has entrusted to them.

Our very first newsletter, in 1981, was six pages; current issues are 24. Originally known as the *Personal Freedom Outreach Newsletter*, it was renamed *The Quarterly Journal* in 1988. The publication has served as a way for PFO to realize one of its primary objectives of educating

the church as to the dangers of cultic and aberrational theologies.

In the early days, much of the newsletter's content focused upon cultic teachings and groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. In the late 1980s, however, PFO began to include investigative reporting and regularly published articles examining the unbiblical teachings of "Christian" authors such as Rebecca Brown, Benny Hinn, and others.

PFO has strived to not just tell Christians what's wrong, but to be workmen unashamed who rightly divide the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15). We made every effort to attempt to educate believers in a proper understanding of the Scriptures and the "apostles' doctrine." False teachers and their unchecked false doctrine often bring devastation into the lives of their devotees. We pray that during these past 40 years, our newsletter has been an antidote against these false teachings.

Those who have been responsible for publishing the *Journal* are extremely grateful for the friends and readers who have stood by us with prayers, generous financial contributions, moral support, encouragement, and practical help over these many years. We know that one of the most important factors for success of any endeavor is teamwork. And truly, during these past 40 years it has been a team effort. Thank you for making it possible for PFO to produce and make available its longstanding periodical. *Soli Deo gloria* — to God alone be the glory.

—MKG

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BETHEL CHURCH SUSPENDS HEALING MINISTRY

Bethel Church likes to boast of its signs and wonders, including healing the sick and raising the dead. The megachurch in Redding, Calif., is led by Bill and Beni Johnson and Kris Vallotton, and through its Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry it supposedly trains its students in the supernatural and miracles.

But in March, amid restrictions imposed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the church announced that it was suspending its faith healing ministry at area hospitals where members go to lay hands on the sick and pray for healing.

According to *The Sacramento Bee*, Aaron Tesauro, a church spokesman, said in an email, "Though we believe in a God who actively heals today, students are not being encouraged to visit healthcare settings at this time, and moreover, are taught that even under normal circumstances, they must receive permission from both the facility and the individual before engaging in prayer."

The newspaper's report also noted Bethel's inconsistency, "As it was, there was no shortage of schadenfreude that a church known for claiming to have healed everything from brain tumors to deafness is now telling people to wash their hands to keep disease at bay."

Last December, the church also received national attention from the media when it unsuccessfully tried to bring a 2-year-old girl back to life through daily gatherings at the church consisting of singing and prayer.

—MKG

MORMON CHURCH STILL GROWING — BUT SLOWER

Recent membership data for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints show that the 16.5-million-member sect is still growing but not at the rate the church might like. The past several years have yielded its lowest net increases in decades.

Religion Unplugged, an online news source, reported, "over the last 25 years, growth rates have declined significantly, particularly in countries where Mormonism has historically seen the greatest success: the United States, Mexico, the Philippines, and others, according to Matt Martinich, who studies LDS membership and growth trends at the Cumorah Foundation."

During the past six years, the growth rate for the church has been less than 2 percent a year. In 2018, the growth rate was only 1.21 percent. Current figures, for 2019, were issued at the church's 190th Annual General Conference on April 4 and are slightly better at 1.54 percent. Jana Riess, a journalist who studies and writes about the LDS Church, says the recent membership trends are bleak compared to the "intoxicating growth of the 1960s through the 1990s, when a *bad* year might have seen growth of just 3% or 4%, and a good year more like 6% to 8%."

Both internal and external factors are being blamed for the slower growth.

Calling attention to the internal reasons for the stagnant growth figures, the Religion Unplugged article stated that "there is general agreement that falling birthrates bear a good portion of the blame" as well as "the number of young members who leave the church before their childbearing years." The news report indicated that in 1981, Mormon couples had 3.3 children, compared with the national average of 1.8 children. By 2016, LDS families had fewer than three children.

Among the external causes was "a decrease in the efficacy of LDS missionaries, who in 1989 each baptized an average of 8 converts on their missions, compared to an average of 3.5 in 2017."

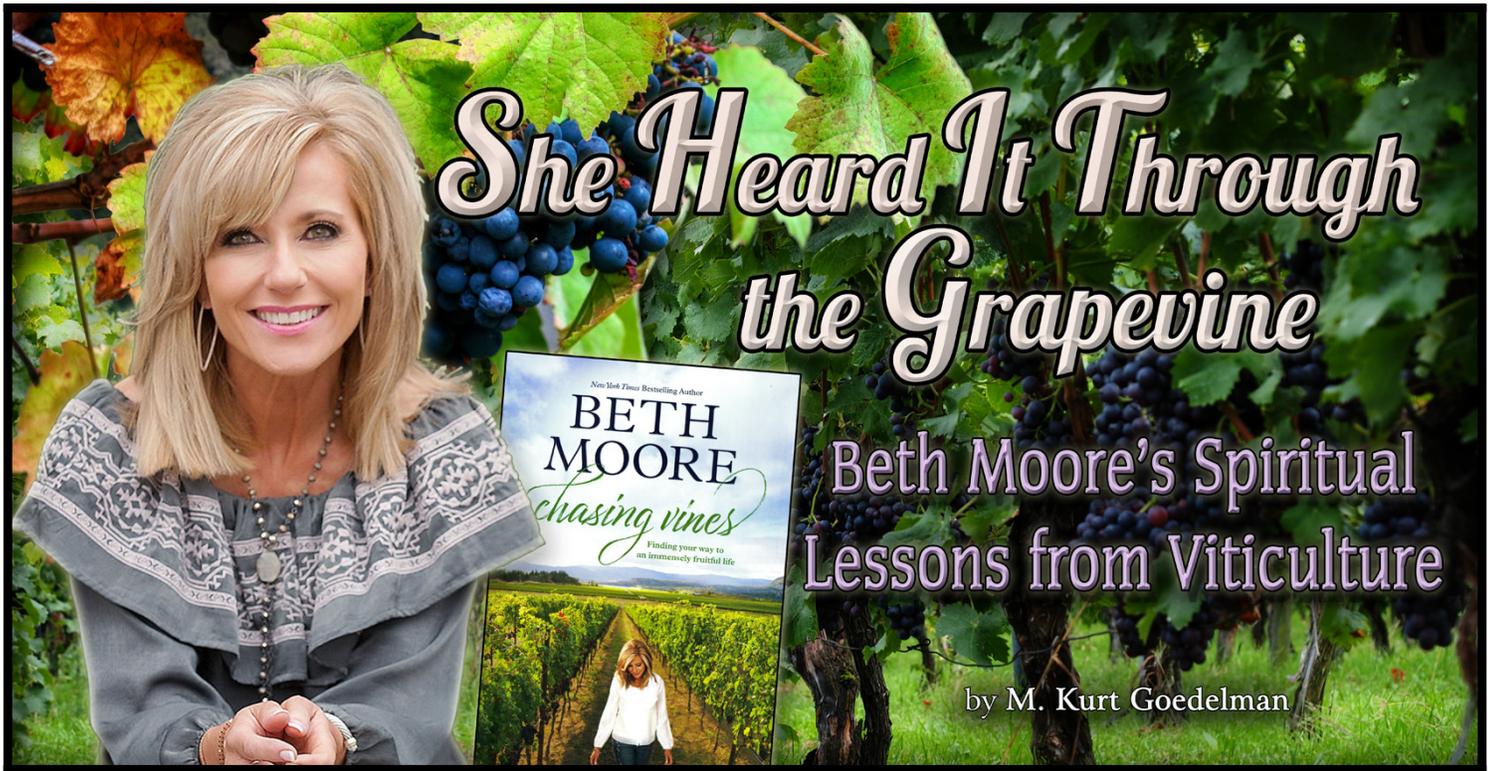
It is expected that membership figures will continue on a passive trend — at least in 2020. The *Deseret News* reported in April, "The church has moved tens of thousands of missionaries who were serving in countries other than their own back to their home countries because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds have been released early and others will be released temporarily at the end of the month."

—MKG

WATCHTOWER RETURNS TO A FAMILIAR THEME

Final days are here again, so says M. Stephen Lett, a member of the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses. In March, the Watchtower organization took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to draw attention to its all too familiar recurrent message, that God's kingdom is about to be established and that He will destroy all those who are not Jehovah's Witnesses. It's a declaration that's as old as the organization itself.

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Author and Bible teacher Beth Moore is beloved among those who read her books, attend her conferences and simulcasts, and view her television broadcasts. She is also a champion in Christian book sales, frequently appearing on best-seller lists. She has been labeled by fans as “a straight-up Twitter prophetess”¹ and as one review noted, Moore “uses all her homespun charm and folksy anecdotes to convince Christian followers to throw off their characteristic unbelief.”² Without question, it is that trait that helps endear Moore to her followers.

And some even take their loyalty to and descriptions of Moore to a degree suggestive of divine inspiration. In her blog about Moore’s latest book, *Chasing Vines*, Melissa Elsner wrote:

“The woman knows her Bible and, I truly believe, *God speaks through her in powerful ways*. I am so thankful for her obedience and faith and courage to walk in her calling. ... Each page had words that seemed to grab me. *I knew it was the Holy Spirit speaking* and reminding me WHO I belong to and WHO cares for me so deeply and intentionally.”³

In her new book, Moore explores the subject of viticulture (the scientific study of the cultivation of grapes and grape vines) to draw upon the Old Testament metaphor of the nation of Israel being a choice vine planted in a vineyard, and that in the New Testament this imagery is taken to a new level when Jesus referred to Himself as the true vine. About this volume, it is said:

“Moore gives us fresh hope, revealing the abundant secrets of a fruitful, God-delighting life. Tracing the images of vine, branch, and fruit through Scripture, and sharing stories from her own journey, Beth shows us that nothing in our lives is wasted. Not the place we’ve been planted — or even the painful pruning. Nothing is for nothing.”⁴

And “sharing stories from her own journey” is what Moore is good at. Additionally, another aspect of Moore’s homespun charm is that in all her inspirational books she has the propensity to play down to her readers. She wants them to know that she’s just one of the girls with all their same problems and emotions. For example, in *Chasing Vines*, she relates:

“I know what it’s like to fear not being seen. I know what it’s like to worry that I’m not of use. I know how easy it is to feel giftless in a gift-driven society. If you’re anything like me, you long to contribute. You long to matter.”⁵

And she admits:

“Over the years, I’ve had the hardest time figuring out where I belong. I’ll think, *‘This is it!’* and the next thing I know, that hostile dog of insecurity starts nipping at my heels again, telling me I’m out of place. I’m either not enough or too much almost everywhere I go.”⁶

Then she confesses:

“I’ve spent so much of my life wondering if God was ashamed of me. I won’t scandalize you with all the reasons why, but you can trust me on this: they’re legitimate.”⁷

While such confessions ingratiate Moore with those striving to live a victorious Christian life, the disconnect they fail to see is that she is advertised as one who has the an-

swers and solutions to spiritual renewal and in living a life pleasing to God. After all, Moore told us in *When Godly People Do Ungodly Things* that “devoted followers of Christ indeed can and sometimes do fall into the traps of Satan” and Christians can “safeguard themselves against Satan’s attacks.”⁸ Then in *Get Out of That Pit*, Moore — who was described as “a former pit-dweller” — gave us “straight talk about God’s deliverance”⁹ as the book was billed as “Beth’s most stirring message yet of the sheer hope, utter deliverance ... and complete and glorious freedom of God.”¹⁰ And next, in *So Long Insecurity*, readers were told that “It’s time to say, ‘So long!’ to insecurity” and “that insecurity is curable.”¹¹

So, in the last two decades, Moore has taught her followers how to know and defend themselves against the schemes of the devil, experience “utter deliverance” from life’s pits, and how to procure real, lasting, soul-changing security. Yet with each new publication comes Moore’s ongoing confessions of spiritual adversity and personal struggle. In *Chasing Vines*, she further adds to the aforementioned reflections when she laments:

“For the life of me, I cannot get my life to fix. Oh, I’ve tried, all right. If effort could ease the way, I’d be walking on a carpet of marshmallows. Still, challenges in my life never cease to loom large. Sometimes they loom so large they nearly eclipse the sun. With a sketchy background like mine, the simplest explanation is that I sinned so grievously and made so many foolish choices, I sabotaged the rest of my life beyond recovery. But that doesn’t sound much like the gospel of Jesus, does it?”¹²

PIETY, PRAGMATISM, AND PUT DOWNS

Another pattern that has emerged in Moore’s writings is a subtle parading of her own piety along with — to use a modern colloquialism — throwing her husband Keith under the bus. In line with the former, Moore mentions things like how her two dogs “would

whine obnoxiously every morning until I’d finally finish my devotions.”¹³ Then in even more grandiose fashion — and aligning herself with those who mimic the practices of the mystic desert fathers — she writes:

“Years ago, when the number of attendees at Living Proof Live events started swelling — and, consequently, scaring me half to death — I decided that God would be most honored, and I’d be most reliant on Him if I fasted from the time each conference began until after it ended. If effectiveness increased in response to the combination of fasting and praying, as Scripture indicated it did, why wouldn’t the same formula work for fasting and speaking? It made perfect sense to me, so I kept this up for years — not one bite on an event weekend, from Friday after lunch until Saturday afternoon. Twenty-four hours or so was plenty doable. After all, some saints fast for days on end. Admittedly, they’re not much fun on a lunch date, but I respect them to no end. Anyway, I desperately needed God to show up. The way I saw it, God would be more likely to demonstrate favor at events if I fasted.”¹⁴

For one who is said to help women discover true Christian freedom, Moore often has to admit that her “biblical” strategies and methods encompass error and she eventually succumbs to her own misguided practices. Her pre-conference fasting is another example of that, which in due course, went off the rails. She confesses:

“God was faithful. He can be no other way. He carried me through each of those events, especially in the last few hours, when I felt shaky, and afterward, when the meet-and-greet would go on until I was nearly in tears. I’d already given everything I had. I don’t play when I teach. I throw my whole body into it. Then I started seeing stars. Sometimes during the last session, I’d have to steady myself at the

podium for a moment until the lightheadedness passed. I was so depleted at the end of an event that the aftereffects weren’t just physical. I’d immediately face spiritual attack, as if a hoard of demonic spider monkeys were jumping on my back.”¹⁵

But as Moore explains:

“I was in it to win it, so I decided I just needed to pray more. I’d made a commitment, and I wouldn’t break it. What if God withdrew His Spirit? If this sounds like madness to you, welcome to the life of someone so far out on a limb, she felt like she had only the space of a twig to mess up. I was going to keep it up if it killed me. Then at one event, right in the energetic throes of the final session, I thought it was indeed going to. The whole place went dark. By God’s grace, my vision blacked out only for a second, and beyond the notice of the audience, but I can tell you this: I started eating. I’ve done so ever since, and as far as I can tell, God is still coming to the events. He hadn’t told me to fast while I served with every ounce of my being. I’d volunteered to do it out of devotion. It was a godly idea that didn’t produce good fruit.”¹⁶

Taking everything into account, the immediate question is “was it truly a godly idea?” Most doctors will tell you that extended fasting can be bad, even dangerous. God has designed our bodies to stay healthy and productive by receiving vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients from food. As finally became apparent to Moore, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, and other dangers can be experienced with extended fasting. Fasting too long can be life-threatening. While modern-day ascetics promote the practices of self-denial — including fasting — claiming they are powerful and effective spiritual weapons which draw one closer to God (or will have God “show up”), these practices are more akin to “the Colossian heresy,” which Paul condemned in his epistle (Colossians 2, esp. vv. 19-23).

Thus, at times, she appears to be making it up as she goes along and if it works, then it is of God. And if it doesn't, she can write it off as she did above as "a godly idea that didn't produce good fruit." Moore's pragmatic approach is explained further, when she instructs readers:

"At the end of the day, all you can say is that you kept doing *something* — *the next thing* — *to serve Jesus*, however awkwardly and, in hindsight, perhaps embarrassingly, you pulled it off. But lo and behold, something finally started working. Not all the time, of course, and not flawlessly, but satisfyingly enough to suggest that you might be on to something. Your works started producing some semblance of fruit, and you have a sense that you're where you're supposed to be for now."¹⁷

But even more regrettable than the parading of her piety, the engagement of ascetic practices, and her appeal to pragmatic considerations, is Moore's continued demeaning narrations of her husband, Keith. In her previous book, *Audacious*, Moore wrote that:

"[Keith never cared] one iota to be a pastor, deacon, elder, usher or anything else at church. He doesn't often read his Bible but he does on occasion love to flip through a good hymnal. Despite innumerable debates early on, Keith wants to make his spiritual contribution primarily by being a good husband to a woman in full-time ministry. It is a role he fills with tremendous strength and testosterone."¹⁸

She also let it be known that church attendance doesn't appear a top priority for Keith. "When he sits next to me in church, I'm glad. When he doesn't, I'm no longer mad,"¹⁹ she further admitted. In the five years since she penned *Audacious*, it seems Keith hasn't fared any better as Moore continues with her subtle — and even direct — revelations of her husband's lack of spiritual discipline. In *Chasing Vines*, Moore continues to reveal his flaws:

"My husband has never been one to overcorrect well. For instance, my attempt to nip his profanity in the bud only made it grow into a veritable sequoia. Keith doesn't know many Scriptures from memory, but he has thrown a paraphrase of Romans 7:23 at me more times than I can count ... When Keith does a Bible throw-down, he always goes King James on me. I have accused him of preferring it because he dearly loves to quote verses with off-color words, and it offers a smattering."²⁰

She further relates:

"Keith is particularly fond of the KJV for its alternative for *donkey*. This is my life."²¹

In addition to the above, Moore makes other references to Keith's profanity, mentioning his "cussing and spitting,"²² and that she can envision him "cussing a blue streak."²³ She describes him as "not a very religious man"²⁴ and says that:

"Keith insists that the best church services he has ever attended have taken place when he was chest deep in a pair of waders while saltwater fishing. In our early days of marriage, when I had more energy for shaming people, I'd ask him sardonically exactly what Scriptures were preached there. He would have an answer for me: 'Follow me and I will make you fishers.' Who among us has never abbreviated a Bible verse to fit our agenda? Let him cast the first stone."²⁵

In this regard, Moore's ongoing disrespect for her husband is alarming. Scripture mandates that the wife is to respect her husband (Ephesians 5:33), a command which extends even to those with unbelieving spouses (see 1 Peter 3:1-2). As Martha Peace notes, "As a wife, you are to respect your husband even when he sins and even when he is a failure. ... As important as a biblical reproof may be, your compassion and kindness are more important."²⁶ A wife's biblical submission and respect does not mean

that she is to turn a blind eye, accept her husband's sin, and therefore remain silent. But in confronting her husband, the wife must do so in a spirit of humility, respect, prayer, and the love of Christ. A public exposing of the sins and failures of one's spouse, as Moore does, is not only unfortunate, but unbiblical. While rebuke for sinful behavior may be necessary, it is to be done respectfully. As Peace instructs:

"Every Christian is to take great care while administering a reproof. A reproof is when you tell someone what he is doing wrong. Your motive should be to restore him to a right relationship with God. Reproofs are to be gentle, done while '**looking to yourself lest you too be tempted,**' and done privately if possible. (See Galatians 6:1 and Matthew 18:15.) If that much care is to be taken from one Christian to another, how much more care should be taken from a wife to a husband!"²⁷

Moore is setting an unholy precedent for her followers. If she, who is at the pinnacle of women's ministry, can put on public view the spiritual shortcomings of her husband, are they not encouraged or permitted to do the same? In this regard, pastor and Bible expositor John Barnett offers sobering instruction of how a godly woman is to "train younger women in Biblical, simple-to-measure, Spirit-empowered, love-based living":

"Paul [in Titus 2] turns the spotlight on the hardest member of the body to control, according to James — the tongue. Twice in his epistles Paul targets a woman's habits of their speech, saying it is a spiritual qualifier or disqualifier. Though this is a universal problem we all face, Paul specifically says to women who want to serve Christ's church — guard those tongues. 1 Timothy 3:11 'In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, *not malicious talkers* but temperate and trustworthy in everything' (NIV)."²⁸

Barnett continues:

“Godly Titus 2 women never are to surrender their tongues to the devil. They are prompted by the Holy Spirit to make sure that what they say is absolutely true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report before they say it — lest they discredit their ministry effectiveness as a godly Titus 2 woman. One common type of talk that hurts is called gossip and comes in many forms that all of us, and especially those who earnestly seek to be a Titus 2 man or woman should always avoid: *malicious talk, rationalized gossip/talk, and ‘innocent’ gossip*. This usually starts with proper motives and desires but gets off course with unwise sharing of sensitive information, then curiosity sets in and soon the conversation is far beyond the problem and the solution and has become malicious, slanderous, harmful gossip.”²⁹

Elsewhere in her book, it is sad that Moore is willing to describe “Farmer Fred,” who is a family friend, as “a brilliant man and exemplary husband and father,”³⁰ while never affording similar honor and recognition to her own husband. It is also regrettable that the editors at the companies that publish her books (including Broadman & Holman and Tyndale) allow those details of her husband’s faults to be made public. It is also difficult to understand why Moore’s daughter, Melissa, who “read every single chapter”³¹ of *Chasing Vines* before it was given to the publisher, allowed her mother to expose her father’s spiritual weaknesses and flaws.

But Moore’s put-downs also extend beyond her husband. She is also a master at self-abasement, writing that she’s not “easy to please” and “embarrassingly stubborn.”³² In a further description, she reports:

“An evangelical mongrel of sorts, I’ve never managed to escape controversy, but in the early autumn of 2016, as the first leaves in our woods left their limbs, I made people mad who’d been glad to study Scripture with me

for years. I burned some important bridges, unraveled some strong ties, and in the words of the psalmist, tangled with ‘foes, who were too strong for me’ (Psalm 18:17, NIV). ... As the weeks set in, so did the realities. Event attendance dropped. Orders dropped. Revenue dropped. Ministry morale dropped. Up to this point, many of my close ministry companions and I had been inseparable. United. Now we were fractured and scattered and uncertain of the future.”³³

Her comments about herself and her relationships with family, friends, and associates are inconsistent and make it difficult to know if she sees herself as a spiritual mess or a secure role-model. Of critical concern is that Moore and her writings are seen as providing the biblical insight for answers to the difficulties and pitfalls that a Christian may experience and how one may have an abundant spiritual life. Some may argue that all of these life experiences are necessary and make for Moore to be an effective teacher. However, one does not need drink poison to know and warn that it will kill.

FLAWED FORGIVENESS

A subject that Moore repeatedly addresses in her books is that of forgiveness. Forgiveness is an important topic not only in life, but in what the Bible has to say about it. Depending upon the Bible translation one uses, “forgive” and its derivatives³⁴ are words that are mentioned well over 100 times in the Bible. Moreover, forgiveness is our most necessary experience in life because we are all sinners, breaking both God’s and man’s laws. So it is a very important subject to explore. The trouble is that what Moore often says in regard to forgiveness is not entirely biblical. Her observations in *Chasing Vines* once again reflect some spurious concepts.³⁵ She writes:

“We often put conditions on forgiveness. We wonder if some sins are too big to forgive, or we feel compelled to remind other people (and ourselves) how much we’ve been hurt. But for-

giveness isn’t about the magnitude of the sin; it’s about the magnitude of our God. When Jesus forgave those who nailed Him to the cross (Luke 23:34), He wasn’t negating the pain He was experiencing. He wasn’t excusing the sin that had been committed against Him. And He wasn’t letting His oppressors off the hook.”³⁶

Paramount is that Moore fails to see that there are conditions on forgiveness. Biblical forgiveness is a transaction — when repentance is made and forgiveness sought, then forgiveness can (and must) be given. In the true biblical sense, God’s forgiveness is conditional (based upon our repentance), but to whom it will be given is unconditional (Jew, Greek, rich, poor, slave, free, big sinner, little sinner). Moore wants conditions on forgiveness removed and to support her view she cites Jesus, while upon the cross, as one who extended this unconditional forgiveness. Moore errs by presenting a misinterpretation of our Lord’s words recorded by Luke. In the quotation above, she sees Jesus’ words as a *statement of forgiveness*. They are not. His words were a *prayer for forgiveness*.³⁷ As Maria Mayo writes:

“Luke’s depiction of Jesus on the cross is often cited as the quintessential example of unconditional forgiveness. As he is being crucified, Jesus cries out, ‘Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34). Readers often take this to mean that Jesus forgives those who are attacking him. However, a closer look at the syntax reveals that Jesus is not, in fact, forgiving his attackers; rather, he is praying that God might do so. It is possible that the lack of repentance from his attackers prevents Jesus from forgiving the men directly, since he has taught his followers that repentance is a requirement for forgiveness. Also, earlier in the Gospel of Luke Jesus instructs his disciples to ‘pray for those who abuse you’ (Luke 6:38). While his prayer from the cross is a perfect

model of this teaching, it is not an explicit act of forgiveness."³⁸

Jay Adams makes even clearer this important distinction:

"On the cross, Jesus did not forgive; He prayed. The same is true of Stephen. If forgiveness is unconditional, Jesus, Stephen, and others would have *forgiven* their murderers rather than use what, if true, would be a round-about way to do so. ... Jesus' prayer was answered in the response to the preaching of Peter and the apostles on the day of Pentecost, and on those other occasions when thousands of Jews repented and believed the Gospel (Acts 2:37-38; 3:17-19; 4:4). They were not forgiven the sin of crucifying the Saviour apart from believing that He was dying for their sins, but precisely by doing so in response to the faithful preaching of the Gospel in Jerusalem."³⁹

The fallacy of interpreting Luke 23:34 to mean that Jesus spoke forgiveness rather than the potential for forgiveness is shown by examining the account mentioned by Adams above — the response to the preaching of Peter on Pentecost. Take careful note of Acts 2:23, also written by Luke, where Peter charged:

"Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, *you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death*" (emphasis added).

Peter would not have brought up this matter and lay this charge against the Jews if they already had been forgiven. Consider further the text's narration of the people's response in verse 37, "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" Peter's reply, "Repent" (v. 38), provides for us the proper biblical understanding that they were not already forgiven and that forgiveness is conditional.

Moore also seems to struggle with a biblical understanding of forgiveness

in other ways. In her writings and teaching sessions, she often speaks of suffering sexual abuse as a child and, in *Chasing Vines*, she now relates that she did receive "an apology from the perpetrator." But she asserts, "it wasn't enough. It was begrudging and minimizing and brief and final. Think of it under the 'There, I said it' category. 'Now let it go.'"⁴⁰ Following the apology, in due course, Moore says:

"I forgave — but not because the man wanted me to. I forgave because it's the way of the Cross. I forgave because I realized this man had no idea what he'd done, no idea what his unspeakably selfish actions had cost me or anyone else who may have fallen victim to him. No sooner had the thought gone through my mind, *He has no clue*, than the words from the Cross ran right behind them: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). I didn't forgive right then. I didn't forgive in any single moment that I recall. I wish I could say I did. I forgave over time. I forgave through teaching, through developing a different mind-set, through praying, through agreeing with Jesus about what to do when I'm wronged."⁴¹

While Moore's description may be the sort of narrative that charms her readers, it is fraught with unbiblical concepts. First, Moore stays the victim by relegating the apology as not being "enough," and regarding it as "begrudging and minimizing and brief and final." And perhaps the verbal exchange with her abuser was just that. While an apology may be an expression of sorrow or regret for sinning against someone, in and of itself it is not a direct confession of sin and falls well short of true repentance and seeking forgiveness. Although Moore seems to suggest that the offender *did want* to be forgiven ("I forgave — but not because *the man wanted me to*"), however if she deemed her assailant's confession was not enough, an attempt should have been made on her part to help him

not only understand the offense, but also to guide him in a proper understanding of the means of forgiveness.

The objective of forgiveness is to obey and honor God, while blessing the one who sinned against you. Moore's emphasis appears to be that forgiveness is a means of her own personal relief. As Jay Adams instructs:

"Like God's, your forgiveness must be 'gracious.' In Ephesians 4:32, 'Be kind, one to the other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God, for Christ's sake has forgiven you,' the verb for forgiveness stresses the graciousness of the act of forgiveness. Not only is true forgiveness underserved, but it is always granted out of mercy (kind tender-heartedness), certainly not for the ulterior purpose of obtaining something for oneself!"⁴²

Additionally, Moore's declaration that she "didn't forgive right then," "didn't forgive in any single moment," and that she "forgave over time" also presents a false view of the process of biblical forgiveness. While forgiveness does not mean an instant restoration of trust, it is, nonetheless, *immediate*. It is an act of the will, an act of obedience, an active process, not a feeling that must be worked through. Consider how tragic it would be if God's response to our repentance was, "I won't forgive right now" or "I will forgive you over time." God's forgiveness is not only total, complete, and unconditional, but also immediate. It may sound like "an incredibly high standard," but as Ken Sande reminds us:

"As Christians, we cannot overlook the direct relationship between God's forgiveness and our forgiveness: 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you' (Eph. 4:32). 'Forgive as the Lord forgave you' (Col. 3:13b). God has given us an incredibly high standard to live up to when we have the opportunity to forgive someone. Fortunately, he also gives us the grace

and the guidance we need to imitate him by forgiving others as he has forgiven us."⁴³

Finally, Moore also fails in the process of biblical forgiveness by her repetitive speaking of how she was sexually abused as a child by someone close to her family who lived in her house.⁴⁴ In that Moore claims she has forgiven her abuser, one of the responsibilities of forgiveness is the promise not to bring up the sin and use it against the offender or talk about the sin to others. In this regard, Adams stresses:

"As you now know, when you forgive another, you declare that you are canceling his debt, removing his guilt, and promising that you will never again bring up his guilt, and promising that you will never again bring up his offenses to use against him. The promise involved three things. 1. I will not bring the matter up to you. 2. I will not bring the matter up to another. 3. I will not bring the matter up to myself."⁴⁵

Thus there are many ways in which one can err in a biblical understanding of forgiveness. Moore has a propensity to establish her teaching on the subject through a grid of feelings — forgiving over time — and in failing to promise not to continue to speak of the matter.

THE LONG AND WINDING PATH THROUGH BETH'S VINEYARD

Chasing Vines is an amalgamation of stories from Moore's personal life and copious details on viticulture infused with the spiritual — how this all plays out for one to discover the true experience of a fruitful, God-pleasing, meaning-filled life. Unfortunately, this latter aspect often gets lost — or at least obscured in the process. Verses from Isaiah 5, which is a parable comparing Israel to a vineyard that God planted and cultivated but which did not bear fruit, and verses from John 15, which is Jesus' metaphor that where Israel failed, He will succeed to produce fruit in all the branches that are connected to Him, are primary among the various Scripture texts that

Moore uses. At times, however, she will employ a Bible verse as long as there is some passing mention of a vine, vineyard, grapes, or so forth.

In addition, readers will also encounter strange remarks such as, "Only one thing attracts the attention of the devil like the smell of blood. It's the smell of grapes."⁴⁶ How and why this is so — or the biblical basis for such a statement — is never explained.

Some of Moore's hobby horses find their way into her vineyard discourse. There are topics which she has incited (or fueled) social media debates — including social justice,⁴⁷ sexism and misogyny and racism and white supremacy,⁴⁸ and complementarianism⁴⁹ — and which receive at least a passing mention in the book. In addressing the subject of complementarianism — the belief that says women are limited regarding leadership positions (pastor or elder) within the church — Moore contends:

"'Separate but equal' makes statements that are understandably hard to marry ... Separatism produces bad fruit. I've observed it, experienced it, added to it, been complicit in it, watched it, read about it, heard about it, and seen evidence of it for far too long to dismiss any further. ... Pervasive gender exclusivity in the organic development of the church does not — indeed, it cannot — bear ripe fruit because half of what is required for maturity is all but missing."⁵⁰

Yet for one who argues for an egalitarianism position — the belief that says women are permitted to serve in every capacity of church leadership, including pastors and elders — her statement that "Roles can differ without sacrificing mutual respect"⁵¹ is out of place and contradictory.

Moore uses various components of vine growing as the titles of the chapters and as the springboards to develop her precepts. And here, too, she will draw an entire concept from a single word in a biblical passage. One of the most extreme examples is

her chapter entitled "Manure." Here Moore uses the English Standard Version (ESV) and draws from Jesus' parable of the barren fig tree found in Luke 13:6-9. In Moore's thinking, and to establish her thesis, she claims the parable is about manure. She writes:

"I love many things about Jesus, but the fact that He's the type to work a parable about manure into the Holy Scriptures rates right up there in the five-star bonus category."⁵²

And she further states:

"If you find yourself a tad concerned about an entire chapter dedicated to excrement, rest assured that there is divine precedent for this. Jesus Himself told a story about a vineyard, and manure makes an appearance."⁵³

The parable is not about manure. It is about the forbearance of God, that He is gracious to allow a time for repentance in a life of fruitlessness. This would be like saying that Jesus taught a parable about carob pods (Luke 15:11-32, the prodigal son) or another about a hundred measures of wheat (Luke 16:1-8, the shrewd manager). In doing so, the meaning and proper interpretation of the parable is sacrificed by one, like Moore, who emphasizes a peripheral detail within the narrative.

As noted above, Moore must draw from the English Standard Version because that is only one of the popular modern translations which use the word *manure* in the passage from Luke's Gospel.⁵⁴ While the symbolic significance of the parable represents a merciful God who grants additional time for repentance and that His forbearance will come to an end and judgment will follow, in her chapter on manure Moore skirts around this understanding to stress that the manure is the unkindness that believers experience from people who are mean, rude, and disparaging.⁵⁵ She says:

"From my personal experience and observation, there are plenty of people willing to provide the manure for you. You don't have to go out looking for it; it will

find you. Sometimes it's just a shovelful here and there, and other times you'll feel like a truck just unloaded on you. ... People will say inexplicable things. They'll do inexplicable things. Some things won't make a whit of rational sense — but they will make good manure."⁵⁶

The book has some good and helpful content. But they are neither abundant nor as fruitful as one may hope. This is due to Moore's excursion into the vine metaphor, taking too many extensive detours through her own personal life adventures, and lessons in horticulture that she developed from hours of interviews with experts and from books.

For example, in the very first chapter, Moore interweaves a description of her new home in the country with, from the Creation account, God has a fondness for dirt ("He liked dirt, so He created it"⁵⁷), all to say that God wants sanctification in our life through planting, watering, pruning, and harvesting.

Moore not only says God likes dirt, but that "God likes watching things grow" and she uses Genesis 2:9 to convey the idea that He apparently sprouted and grew from seeds the various plants and trees in the Garden:

*"God made to spring up. It's a wonder that God would choose to slowly grow what He could have simply created grown. Why on earth would He go to the trouble to plant a garden forced to sprout rather than commanding it into existence, full bloom? Why leave His desk and get His pant legs soiled? Because God likes watching things grow."*⁵⁸

Moore's postulating denies that the universe (and the Garden of Eden) was fully functional from the first week. Scripture clearly states that not only were Adam and Eve created as adults, but other living creatures, plants, and trees as well. On the third day of Creation, God brought forth "the tree that yields fruit" (Genesis 1:12) not the seedling that would sprout into the tree. Then, three days

later, He created man and gave to him "every tree whose fruit yields seed," saying, "to you it shall be for food" (v. 29). Adam did not have to wait for weeks, months, or years to eat of the fruit of the various trees in the Garden. This fruit was available to him from the moment God breathed into him the breath of life. Later, Moore also expresses another troublesome view of Creation.

In one of her more prolonged personal accounts, she spends eight pages of explicit detail of how one of her family dogs was killed by "what we assumed was a pack of coyotes."⁵⁹ The narrative even includes her description of a burial service for the animal. This recounting of the circumstances and grief of the death of her beloved pet is used as a preamble for Moore to say, "Good soil is a curious and compelling combination of life and death. So vital is death to the soil that life cannot exist there without it. The decaying matter from animals and plants is an essential source of nutrients in sustaining life."⁶⁰

In this protracted telling of events, Moore moves beyond her scenic life illustrations and steps into a thorny area when she says, "So vital is death to the soil that life cannot exist there without it." Later in the book, she writes, "The world of viticulture has much to teach us about the way death not only coexists with life but creates the right conditions for sustaining life."⁶¹

Perhaps unintended, but here Moore implies that death has always coexisted with life and is a permanent part of Creation. If this is true, then it would mean that death and decay were present in the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall and when Adam and Eve sinned, it only extended death to humankind. It would also mean that God's proclamation of His Creation as "good" included death and decay. Conceivably, Moore may argue that it was only plant life, not animal or human life, that died prior to the Fall. But that concept is also unbiblical. As Creation apologist Ken Ham instructs:

"Some people argue that there was death before sin, because plants were given for food for

man and the animals (Genesis 1:29-30), thus plants died before sin. However, this objection fails to note carefully what the Bible says about life and death. Biblically speaking, plants do not have a life, as animals and man do. At the end of Genesis 1:30 we see that humans and animals have 'life,' but plants do not. The word 'life' is a translation of two Hebrew words there: *nephesh chayyah*. *Nephesh* is the word usually translated 'soul' or 'creature' depending on context, and *chayyah* is the noun form of the verb 'to live.' *Nephesh* or *nephesh chayyah* is never used to describe plants in the Old Testament. They only describe people and animals. Just as plants are not 'alive' in the same sense as animals and man are, so also they do not 'die' in the same sense. In only one place does the Old Testament use the Hebrew word for 'die' (*mut*) when referring to plants, and in that passage (Job 14:7-12) it is very clear that the death of a plant (tree) is categorically different from the death of a man. So when animals and people ate plants in the world before sin, it did not involve death, because plants do not 'die' in the sense that man and animals do."⁶²

And in explaining the matter of bacteria and microbes, Ham's colleague, Joe Francis, writes:

"Based on the creation account in Genesis, it appears that God originally made microbes to perform only beneficial functions. If so, one would expect many present-day bacteria to continue to perform their 'very good' functions. Creation biologists predicted this and have documented examples. ... While some microbes do cause disease, most do not. About 5,000 species of bacteria have been identified, but only about eight percent cause disease."⁶³

And in addressing why a small percentage are harmful, Francis offers several reasons, including:

“Microbes were originally designed to perform beneficial functions in restricted places, but after the Fall they spread to other places and began to cause disruption and disease.”⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Without question, Beth Moore knows and understands the Gospel. She loves Jesus and is convinced that He “alone is the way, the truth, and the life.”⁶⁵ The problem is that she all too often departs from those essential truths and goes beyond to teach on theological matters of which she does not fully know or understand. She often wanders onto paths of teachings of lesser value; and in doing so she frequently allows her naivety and lack of knowledge of deeper truths and systematic theology to show. For example, in her response to her own questions, “What is your most deeply held belief?” and “What, beneath all else, are you most convinced is true?” she admits that “for more years of my life than I wish to count” her answer was, “I am almost enough. If only I could be more or do just a little more.”⁶⁶

Commenting on a response by a conference participant who replied, “The Bible is true. That’s what I believe most of all” to those questions, Moore says the answer “seemed spiritual enough to be acceptable,” but actually categorizes it as “false beliefs” and “faulty conviction.”⁶⁷ While acknowledging the Bible is true, Moore gives it a subordinate position to her mysticism and experience-oriented beliefs:

“However, the Bible is not a person who can wrap His everlasting arms around you when you’re free-falling into a canyon of despair. Only God Himself can do that.”⁶⁸

Moore’s mysticism entices her followers to supplant the Word of God as she places an emphasis on the subjective or “felt” experience of having God “wrap His everlasting arms around you.” Her supposed access to and intimate relationship with God is realized apart from the Word. She once again overemphasizes subjective experiences to the exclusion of the objective truth of Scripture. Her mys-

ticism casts doubt upon the mission of her ministry which “is dedicated to encourage people to come to know and love Jesus Christ through the study of Scripture.”⁶⁹ Without the Bible, one would never know what God is like — His attributes, His love for mankind, His way of salvation. No mystical experience will ever tell us the truth about God. The Bible does, however.

In a past review of Moore and her theology, we underscored that her teaching lacks the substance and instruction needed for vibrant and robust sanctification. And that Moore’s writing may be likened to cotton candy: It looks like a lot, is colorful, and may be sweet-tasting, but in the end it dissolves quickly and the person is left with a momentary pleasant taste, but with no lasting nourishment. That assessment continues to ring true.

Clearly, the question she poses to herself merits consideration:

“I frequently ask myself (sometimes ruthlessly) if I’ve served mostly straw or wheat — in other words, if my teaching has real substance or if it is stuffed with filler that won’t stand the test of time.”⁷⁰

More importantly, beyond the test of time being the criterion, one should be asking if their teaching has biblical substance and is a faithful proclamation of scriptural truth. It is certain that Moore wants to help women grow in their knowledge of Jesus and realize an immensely fruitful life. Unfortunately, *Chasing Vines* needs a lot of pruning to get past the small talk, poor exegesis, and theological ruts to finally get to its spiritual nutrients.

Endnotes:

1. Sophie Hudson, “The Big Boo Cast, Episode 176” blog. Document accessed at: <https://bigboo.libsyn.com/the-big-boo-cast-episode-176>.
2. Review of Moore’s book *Believing God* on Publishers Weekly website. Document accessed at: www.publishersweekly.com/9780805431896.
3. Melissa Elsner, “Chasing Vines by Beth Moore” on The Profound Brunette blog, Feb. 4, 2020, emphasis added, capitaliza-

tion in original. Document accessed at: www.theprofoundbrunette.com/2020/02/chasing-vines-by-beth-moore.html.

4. Beth Moore, *Chasing Vines: Finding Your Way to an Immensely Fruitful Life*. Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale Momentum, 2020, signature edition, back of book jacket. The “signature edition” of *Chasing Vines* includes a section of “Exclusive Bonus Content” (pp. 287-311) which contains a summary of each chapter along with study questions.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 21, italics in original.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 58.
8. Beth Moore, *When Godly People Do Ungodly Things*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002, back of book jacket.
9. Beth Moore, *Get Out of That Pit*. Nashville: Integrity Publishers (Thomas Nelson), 2007, pg. iii.
10. *Ibid.*, back of book jacket, ellipsis in original.
11. Beth Moore, *So Long, Insecurity*. Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2010, front inside fold of book jacket.
12. *Chasing Vines*, op. cit., pg. 110.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 177.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 69.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 70.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 228, italics in original.
18. Beth Moore, *Audacious*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015, pg. 148.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Chasing Vines*, op. cit., pg. 78.
21. *Ibid.*, italic in original.
22. *Ibid.*, pg. 18.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 179.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 211.
26. Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife*. Bemidji, Minn.: Focus Publishing, Inc., 1995, pg. 113.
27. *Ibid.*, pg. 112, bold in original.
28. John Barnett, “Being a Titus 2 Woman,” from Bible Study Tools website, Feb. 19, 2018, bold italics in original. Document accessed at: www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/being-a-titus-2-woman.html.
29. *Ibid.*, bold italics in original.
30. *Chasing Vines*, op. cit., pg. 185.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 313.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, pg. 157.
34. Including forgiven, forgiveness, forgiving, etc.
35. For one of Moore’s earlier discussions of forgiveness, see *Get Out of That Pit*, op. cit., pp. 31-34.
36. *Chasing Vines*, op. cit., pg. 301. This statement by Moore is from the “signature edition” of the book. It does not appear in the other editions of the book without the bonus content.
37. On page 168, Moore does say Jesus

“prayed from the Cross” in reference to Luke 23:34. She also cites nineteenth-century Anglican theologian Charles John Ellicott who says this verse is a “prayer” not for Pontius Pilate or the chief priests and scribes because they knew what they were doing, but for the soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross and others who “sin against God as not knowing what they do” (pp. 301-302). Ellicott’s commentary is peculiar as there is no way anyone could draw that conclusion from Scripture itself. Also the quotation from Ellicott is from the “signature edition” of the book. It does not appear in the other editions of the book without the bonus content.

38. Maria Mayo, “5 Myths About Forgiveness in the Bible,” from the HuffPost website, Oct. 16, 2011. Document accessed at: www.huffpost.com/entry/five-myths-about-forgiveness-in-the-bible_b_924286.

39. Jay E. Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*. Amityville, N.Y.: Calvary Press, 1994, pp. 28, 29, italic in original.

40. *Chasing Vines*, op. cit., pg. 168.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169, italics in original.

42. *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, op. cit., pg. 92.

43. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2004, pg. 205.

44. Moore has repeatedly spoken of her sexual abuse as a child in her various books, on social media, and on secular and religious television broadcasts.

45. *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, op. cit.,

pg. 82.

46. *Chasing Vines*, op. cit., pg. 227.

47. *Ibid.*, pg. 80.

48. *Ibid.*, pg. 264.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 82.

51. *Ibid.*, pg. 81.

52. *Ibid.*, pg. 219.

53. *Ibid.*, pg. 306. This statement by Moore is from the “signature edition” of the book. It does not appear in the other editions of the book without the bonus content.

54. Other modern translations, including the Amplified Bible, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, New Living Translation, and Holman Christian Standard Bible, all use *fertilize* in the passage (v. 8). Moore does, however, later cite (pg. 223) Luke 13:8 from the King James Version which reads, “He answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it” as *dung it* likewise fits her narrative.

55. In the “signature edition” of the book, Moore later admits, “On the surface, this story seems to be about a barren tree. But upon closer inspection, we see that it is also a story about a merciful vinedresser” (pg. 306). This admission does not appear in the other editions of the book without the bonus content.

56. *Ibid.*, pg. 224.

57. *Ibid.*, pg. 12.

58. *Ibid.*, pg. 17.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 175-182. The quotation is from page 179.

60. *Ibid.*, pg. 189.

61. *Ibid.*, pg. 302. This statement by Moore is from the “signature edition” of the book. It does not appear in the other editions of the book without the bonus content.

62. Ken Ham, “Was There Death Before Adam Sinned?,” from the Answers in Genesis website, April 25, 2014. Document accessed at: <https://answersingenesis.org/death-before-sin/was-there-death-before-adam-sinned/>. This article is from Ken Ham, General Editor, *The New Answers Book 3*. Green Forest, Ark.: Master Books, 2010, chapter 11.

63. Joe Francis, “What About Bacteria?,” from the Answers in Genesis website, April 25, 2014. Document accessed at: <https://answersingenesis.org/biology/microbiology/what-about-bacteria/>. This article is from *The New Answers Book 3*, op. cit., chapter 31.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Chasing Vines*, op. cit., pg. 263.

66. *Ibid.*, pg. 201, italics in original.

67. *Ibid.*, pg. 203, italics in original.

68. *Ibid.*

69. “About” page on Beth Moore - Living Proof Ministries website. Document accessed at: www.lproof.org/about.

70. *Chasing Vines*, op. cit., pg. 77.



SOUND DOCTRINE

(continued from page 1)

and erects obstacles (Romans 16:17); winds of doctrine, spread by the trickery of men (Ephesians 4:14); “doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1); doctrine contrary to the words of Christ and to godliness (1 Timothy 6:3); “various and strange doctrines” (Hebrews 13:9); “destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1); “the doctrine of Balaam” (Revelation 2:14); “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:15); and the so-called “deep things of Satan” (Revelation 2:24, NASB).

Sound doctrine is vital to the health and life of the child of God. By contrast, unsound doctrine can stunt a believer’s growth, neutralize a Christian’s effectiveness for God, or worse. “Garbage in, garbage out” goes the saying. If believers feed on spiritual garbage, their lives will reflect it. Sound doctrine produces spiritual

health. Notice what Paul told Timothy:

“If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed” (1 Timothy 4:6).

Later, in the same chapter, Paul tells him:

“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (v. 16).

Sound doctrine, if adhered to, also enables us to discern and turn away from error. It can function as a screen over the window of our lives, filtering out harmful things, such as false doctrine or unsound, erroneous practices.

In his book, *Against Heresies*, the early Christian apologist, church father, and bishop Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130-200), wrote:

“Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than truth itself.”²

REASONS FOR UNSOUND DOCTRINE

The Scriptures reveal at least three factors that can account for unsound doctrine:

1. *People who intentionally try to deceive.* There are spiritual “con men” who set out to deceive others. For instance, the Scripture says:

“But there were also false prophets in Israel, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will cleverly teach destructive heresies and even deny the Master who bought them. In this way, they will bring sudden destruction on themselves. ... In their greed they will make up clever lies to get hold of your money” (2 Peter 2:1, 3, NLT).

Paul wrote in Ephesians:

“Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won’t be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth” (Ephesians 4:14, NLT).

And Paul told the Ephesian elders, “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29-30).

Paul warned Timothy that in the last days,³ “evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Timothy 3:13).

In 1 John, we are told:

“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. 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 they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us” (2:18-19).

Later, John wrote, “many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Elsewhere, he tells us, “For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2 John 1:7).

There are a couple of things to notice about the above Scriptures. First, in some of the passages, we see

that those harming the flock are doing so from within the church itself (2 Peter 2:1 ff.; Acts 20:29-30); or were once within the body of believers (1 Timothy 4:1-3; 1 John 2:18-19). Second, notice the adjective “many” in the last three Scripture passages above (“many antichrists,” “many false prophets,” and “many deceivers”). This indicates that we can expect there to be *many* who would promote false doctrine; and that, although some of these will operate in the world, some will work from within the church itself.

2. **Pride.** Pride is another reason that a person might teach unsound doctrine. This can encompass such things as wanting to feel important, wanting to seem “deep” or “spiritual” to others by teaching things that no one else, or only a select few, have ever understood — either in the Scriptures or apart from them.

American theologian Thomas Oden was once a theological liberal but later leaned conservative.⁴ In an interview in *Christianity Today*,⁵ Oden was asked:

“You have told about a dream in which you were walking in the New Haven cemetery. You came across your own tombstone and the epitaph read, ‘He made no new contribution to theology.’ Were you happy or distressed to read that?”⁶

Oden replied, “In my dream I was extremely pleased, for I realized I was learning what Irenaeus meant when he warned us not to invent new doctrine. This was a great discovery for me.”⁷ Although Oden acknowledged that something is not erroneous merely by virtue of its being new, he also stated that, “our culture errs in the direction of the idolatry of the new.”⁸

Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul wrote:

“I tend to be a conservative theologian. I doubt I will ever come up with an insight that has not already been worked over in great detail by greater minds than mine. In fact, when it comes to theology, I am not interested

in novelty. If I were a physicist, I would try constantly to come up with new theories to satisfy nagging anomalies, but I consciously refrain from doing that when it comes to the science of theology. Sadly, many are quite willing to pursue novelty.”⁹

Some, however, want to either use the Bible as a book of deep teachings or “mysteries,” which they claim to have the ability to decode; or they may claim to have discovered new or “secret” teachings which only a few have discovered; or they may feel that they have new teachings that improve upon the teachings of Jesus, the apostles, and the Bible. Some of these may claim to have had revelations that supersede Scripture. The Scriptures warn us:

“Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God” (Colossians 2:18-19).

And Paul speaks elsewhere of some who, “have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions” (1 Timothy 1:6-7, NASB). Paul says that these teachers ignorantly expound with confidence, even though they have no idea what they’re talking about!

New Testament scholar Gordon Fee wrote:

“Let it be said at the outset ... that the aim of good [biblical] interpretation is not uniqueness; one is not trying to discover what no one else has ever seen before. Interpretation that aims at, or thrives on, uniqueness can usually be attributed to pride (an attempt to ‘outclever’ the rest of the world), a false understanding of spirituality (wherein the Bible

is full of deeply buried truths waiting to be mined by the spiritually sensitive person with special insight), or vested interests (the need to support a theological bias, especially in dealing with texts that seem to go against that bias). Unique interpretations are usually wrong. This is not to say that the correct understanding of a passage may not often seem unique to someone who hears it for the first time. But it is to say that uniqueness is *not* the aim of our task. The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the 'plain meaning of the text,' the author's intended meaning. And the most important ingredient one brings to this task is an enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of what is written. Correct interpretation, therefore, brings relief to the mind as well as a prick or prod to the heart."¹⁰

Lutheran pastor Don Matzat wrote, "You cannot replace sound exegesis with 'The Lord showed me.'"¹¹ He also offered this advice:

"It is very important for God's people to develop an eye for the erroneous use of Scripture and a sensitivity to sound doctrine. When you hear or read a concept which is being offered as a legitimate Christian truth, ask yourself the question: *Does the concept come out of Scripture as a part of the total theme of God's Word or is it being read into Scripture?* Did the person offering the concept find it in the Bible, or did he find it elsewhere and then try to prove it from the Bible?"¹²

3. *The Untaught and Unstable.* Yet a third source of false or unsound doctrine is untaught and unstable people. We find this group mentioned in 2 Peter, which says:

"[C]onsider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation — as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which

are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (3:15-16).

Here we find a surprising but welcome admission by the Apostle Peter that some things in Paul's letters are difficult to understand! However, Peter goes on to say that untaught and unstable people twist these difficult passages in Paul's letters to their own destruction. Further, their twisting of difficult things in Paul's epistles does not end simply with those passages written by Paul, but that they also twist the rest of the Scriptures to their own destruction.

There are those, who through ignorance and/or instability, believe and/or teach false doctrine. Some cults were begun by such people. The twentieth-century healer William Branham belongs in this category. He was most likely guilty of pride and deception as well.¹³ Another person who might fit the category of an untaught person teaching false doctrine was William Miller, whose error in predicting dates for the return of Christ — contrary to such clear Scriptures as Matthew 24:36; 25:13; and Acts 1:7 — resulted in the Seventh-day Adventist movement, although he himself never became a part of that group.

There are likely countless examples of untaught and unstable people twisting the Scriptures to their own destruction. However, not all of those who are so misled, mislead *others* through *teaching* false doctrine.

PRIMARY SOURCES OF SOUND DOCTRINE

Before discussing the sources of sound doctrine, we should state that *no person (except the Lord) has a perfect theology.*¹⁴ There are various reasons for this, related to the human condition. For one thing, everyone comes to the Scriptures with a certain background and worldview that unavoidably, and likely, unconsciously, colors how we read Scripture. Additionally, all of us approach the Scriptures with certain preconceptions, limitations of understanding, incomplete knowl-

edge, biases, and blind spots. The Scripture reveals that all of our understanding in this life is partial and incomplete (1 Corinthians 8:2; 13:9).

Having said this, the primary sources of sound doctrine are the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit.

The Scriptures are the foundation, the bedrock, of sound doctrine. They are the written Word of God, inerrant in the original manuscripts. The Bible, which includes the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, is the source of sound doctrine. For instance, Paul reminded Timothy:

"[F]rom childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

When Paul references the Holy Scriptures above, he is referring to the Old Testament. While sound doctrine does encompass the Old Testament, for the Christian it also especially comes from the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, which are recorded in the New Testament and which build upon the foundation laid in the Old Testament.

The Teaching of Jesus. In 1 Timothy, we read:

"If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing" (6:3-4, NASB).

Here Paul tells Timothy that the words of the Lord Jesus are sound words. He also speaks of "the doctrine conforming to godliness," which is another characteristic of sound doctrine, that will be mentioned later.

A second Scripture which shows that the words of the Lord Jesus comprise sound doctrine is the Great

Commission where Jesus instructs the disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Teaching of the Apostles. We can also infer that sound doctrine includes the teaching of the apostles. For instance, in the early part of Acts, we are told that the new converts, "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42).

And Paul tells the Christians in Corinth, "Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you" (1 Corinthians 11:2). (See also Paul's references to the traditions that he taught the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6.)

The Holy Spirit. It is understandable that the Scriptures are our foundation for sound doctrine. Yet, perhaps less obviously, the Holy Spirit is also a source for sound doctrine. For one thing, it is the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:21). Beyond inspiration, however, we will briefly mention three additional roles of the Holy Spirit in relation to sound doctrine: Illumination, teaching, and discernment.

First, the Holy Spirit illuminates the Scriptures to the child of God. Theologian Robert Lightner wrote:

"The Holy Spirit, who was used in the giving, receiving, and acknowledging of God's Word, is the one who enables the child of God to understand it. This we call the *illumination* of Scripture."¹⁵

During Jesus' earthly ministry, our Lord illuminated the Scriptures to His followers, the multitudes, and even to His enemies. After Jesus ascended to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit, who now illuminates Scripture for the believer.

Despite all our limitations, the Holy Spirit is able to give us a true understanding of Scripture, even as the risen Lord Jesus did with the two

disciples on the road to Emmaus, when it says, "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

Because the Bible was given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16-17), it is necessary for us to ask the Lord to open our understanding, as He did with those early disciples, that we also might comprehend the Scriptures. As the Psalmist prayed, "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (Psalm 119:18); or, again, "Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law" (Psalm 119:34).

The Scriptures declare:

"But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Second, the Holy Spirit teaches the believer. Jesus said to His disciples:

"These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:25-26).

This brings out the fact that the Holy Spirit is our Helper, and one of the ways that He helps us is by teaching us. He also brings to our remembrance the Scriptures, including those things that Jesus taught. Again, when Jesus was on earth, He taught His disciples that the Holy Spirit, who now indwells believers, teaches us, and also brings appropriate Scriptures to our minds.¹⁶

The Scripture also says, "But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.' But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

A third way in which the Holy Spirit helps us is by giving us discernment and warning us of false doctrine. We see this when John describes

how God protects believers from antichrists. About this, John writes, "But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things" (1 John 2:20). Just a few verses later, John tells us, "These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him" (vv. 26-27).

Although some commentators differ on what "the anointing" that John describes in the two passages above is, it can be understood as a reference to the Holy Spirit, Who indwells the child of God; and Who, as mentioned above, teaches the believer. In this case, He functions to warn believers of antichrists and deceivers and thus, if heeded, grants believers the discernment to detect false doctrine.

John is not saying here that believers don't need the ministry of teachers in the Body of Christ for at least two reasons. First, because John himself is teaching believers in this very letter. And second, because God Himself placed teachers within the church, because teachers are one means that God uses to bring the church to maturity (see Ephesians 4:11-16).¹⁷

SECONDARY SOURCES OF SOUND DOCTRINE

In addition to the primary sources of sound doctrine being the Bible and the Holy Spirit, there are a number of secondary sources of sound doctrine, including certain church creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, trustworthy church confessions, doctrinally accurate hymns and songs, sound sermons, good Christian literature, and so forth.

Creeds are doctrinal summaries. They do not deal with all subjects in the Bible or theology. Church history scholar Justo González explains:

"We tend to think that the purpose of a creed is to summarize all the content of Christian doctrine. But in fact creeds were composed in order to bolster

particular points of doctrine that were under attack — which is precisely the reason why there is so much in the Apostles' Creed about Jesus and so little about the Holy Spirit. This also explains the silence of the Apostles' Creed on matters such as Scripture, the sacraments, and many others."¹⁸

The Apostles' Creed. Theology professor Justin Holcomb states, "The Apostles' Creed is the oldest creed of the church, and its influence can be seen in many of the subsequent creeds in church history."¹⁹ The Creed states:

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried; He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and [sits] on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen."²⁰

There are three phrases in this creed that call for explanation:

1. "*He descended into hell.*" This was a late addition to the Creed²¹ and it is not speaking of the Lord going into eternal hell, but simply to the realm of the dead. Holcomb explains, "Initially the language of 'descent into hell' was borrowed from the Old Testament; it simply meant that Jesus died or passed to sheol (the pit or grave) just as any other person did."²² In fact, modern versions of the Apostles' Creed sometimes render this phrase, "He descended to the dead," which is a much preferable rendering.

2. "*The holy catholic church.*" Holcomb states, "The term [catholic] is usually translated in Protestant churches as 'universal,' but this does

not quite do justice to its richness. 'Catholic' means that the church exists in every nation where the gospel has spread. ... Wherever the whole apostolic gospel is visibly maintained, that is where the 'catholic church' is."²³

3. "*The communion of saints.*" González states, "Of all the phrases in the Creed, this is the one whose exact meaning has been most discussed by scholars and interpreters."²⁴ However, this phrase seems to mean "we are affirming ... our fellowship with believers of all times and places."²⁵

González explains, "the Creed itself has three main parts, one referring to each of the three persons of the Trinity — although ... the section referring to the Son is much more detailed than the other two."²⁶

Regarding the origin of the Apostles' Creed, he points out:

"According to a legend dating to the fourth century, as the twelve apostles prepared to leave Jerusalem and undertake their mission to various parts of the world, they conferred about the contents of their preaching, each contributing what he deemed best, and thus was the Apostles' Creed formed."²⁷

In a further embellishment to this legend, "each of the twelve, led by the Spirit, proposed a particular clause" of the Creed.²⁸

The origins of "the Apostles' Creed can be traced back only as far as the middle of the second century, where a formula very similar to the Creed itself was used in Rome."²⁹ Holcomb notes that, "The present form of the Apostles' Creed, which is both longer and more recent [than the Old Roman Creed³⁰], was probably not compiled until the middle of the fifth century."³¹

So central is the Apostles' Creed to the Roman Catholic Church that it devotes well over 200 pages of its *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to an exposition of the various phrases in this Creed.³²

The Nicene Creed. It would be more technically accurate to refer to what is commonly referred to today as the Nicene Creed (and which will be

referred to that way in this article) as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. As one source explains, the Nicene Creed was:

"Originally the theological confession resulting from the first Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) ... The Nicene Creed recited in churches today resembles the original, but having been revamped at the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381), the current version is longer and excludes certain original phrases."³³

The Nicene Creed is almost twice as long as the Apostles' Creed and is also more detailed.³⁴ It doesn't contain the somewhat difficult phrases that the Apostles' Creed has about Jesus descending to hell or "the communion of saints." Elsewhere, this same above-quoted source explains, "The Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) met primarily to resolve the debate over Arianism (the doctrinal teaching that Christ was the highest created being)."³⁵ Thus, the early heresy of Arianism denied that Jesus is God. It taught that, "although Christ was fully human, he was not fully God."³⁶ It was named after a fourth-century Alexandrian elder named Arius, who promoted this teaching. At the Council of Nicea, "Arius's teaching was condemned as heretical."³⁷ Today, the Jehovah's Witnesses are the spiritual descendants of the Arians, in that they adhere to this same ancient heresy.

Whereas the Apostles' Creed is the church creed largely used by Roman Catholics and Protestants, the Eastern Orthodox instead use the Nicene Creed. However, both creeds are Trinitarian, and all branches of Christianity would subscribe to the doctrines taught in the Nicene Creed.³⁸

WHAT DOCTRINES MAKE UP SOUND DOCTRINE?

In discussing the actual doctrines that make up sound doctrine, we encounter at least two difficulties. First, there are more things than can be covered in a single article. Second, there is disagreement over some of the teachings that make up sound doctrine. For instance, if the church

one attends has a strong emphasis on Bible prophecy related to the Second Coming of Jesus, members may regard a particular view of the timing of the Lord's return to be essential to sound doctrine. Churches that have a lesser emphasis or a different view of the matter may not view this as essential.

The book *Who Needs Theology?* speaks of the necessity "to divide valid Christian beliefs into categories based on levels of importance."³⁹ It is explained this way:

"In other words, once a belief is determined to be valid — that is, consistent with authoritative Christian norms — the next question is 'How important is it?' Is this a belief all Christians *must* hold in order to be authentically Christian? Or is this belief one on which Christians may legitimately disagree? Over the centuries theologians have developed three main categories of Christian beliefs: *dogma*, *doctrine* and *opinion*. A belief is considered a dogma if it seems essential to the gospel. In other words, if its denial would seem to entail *apostasy* — rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ — then it is a dogma. A doctrine, as the term is used here, is a belief that is considered important without being essential. That is, a particular Christian church or denomination may consider the belief a test of fellowship without claiming that its denial amounts to apostasy. The denial of a doctrine may be considered heresy but not necessarily outright apostasy. A belief is relegated to the status of opinion when it is considered interesting but relatively unimportant to the faith of the church. One is allowed to believe whatever one wishes about the matter so long as it does not conflict with a dogma or doctrine. Denial of an opinion is simply a difference of interpretation. Different Christian groups populate these categories with different beliefs, and that is one major reason for the existence of different denominations. One Christian denomination may

consider belief in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ a dogma and treat anyone who denies it as a non-Christian, whereas another denomination may consider that belief a doctrine and simply require it for membership without claiming that it is absolutely necessary to being a Christian. A few denominations may even relegate it to the status of mere opinion. The point is that there is no universal categorization. The proper categorization is a constant matter of debate within and between Christian denominations, although there really is more agreement on this than many people suspect."⁴⁰

The category distinctions mentioned above — between dogma, doctrine, and opinion — are helpful to keep in mind. In fact, we could add more distinctions than that, particularly between the categories of dogma and doctrine and perhaps between doctrine and opinion.

Evangelical theologian Robert Lightner wrote:

"In 1909 two Christian laymen made possible the publication of a twelve-volume set called, *The Fundamentals*. ... The work was a defense of the faith against the attacks that had been and were being made upon it by secular philosophy, unbelieving science, and especially modern, liberal theology. Five major doctrines and themes related to them were set forth in the twelve small volumes. The major doctrines were: 1. the inspiration and authority of Scripture, 2. the virgin birth of Christ, 3. the deity of Christ, 4. the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and 5. the bodily resurrection of Christ and His second coming. A quick look at the list tells us that the two doctrines around which all the discussion revolved were the person and work of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible. On the basis of these fundamentals, the evangelicals (or the fundamentalists as they became known) and the liberals (or modernists as they

were called then) were separated. The lines were clearly drawn. Those who embraced and defended these traditional doctrines of the faith were called fundamentalists and those who did not were called modernists."⁴¹

Lightner also notes that, "Modernists are now called liberals and fundamentalists are sometimes called evangelicals," although he points out that the words "evangelical" and "fundamental" have changed meaning over time.⁴² Nevertheless, he states, "The term *evangelical*, however, designates one who is orthodox in his beliefs, in contrast to one who is unorthodox."⁴³ And orthodoxy, which means "right belief," is a synonym for sound doctrine.

What are some of the elements that make up sound doctrine? Space permits mention of only a few:

The Person and Work of the Lord Jesus. This would encompass the fact that He is God; His eternal existence; His Virgin birth; His sinless life; His miracles; His substitutionary atoning death; His resurrection from the dead on the third day; His ascension into heaven, where He is seated at the Father's right hand; and His physical, bodily return to the earth in the future. Others could be added, but these would be the major points.

The Gospel. The Gospel consists of two parts: Information — that is, the content of the Gospel — and personal appropriation of that message. The primary content of the Gospel is found in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4:

"Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you — unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."

Personal appropriation of the Gospel comes when a person places his

faith in Jesus as his sin-bearing Substitute — the one Who died on the Cross in his place and on his behalf. When a person puts his trust in Jesus as his personal Savior, he receives forgiveness of sins and right standing with the Father. When one repents of sin and turns to God in saving faith, that person receives the free gift of salvation in His Son, which includes, among other things, eternal life, forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit living within them, and he becomes an adopted child of God. This person has been born again and will never come into condemnation, but has passed from death into eternal life (John 5:24).

Scripture says, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31, NASB). The word “believe” simply means “trust.” The Scripture also says, “as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12).

The Trinity. We can only give the briefest mention of this doctrine here. The doctrine of the Trinity declares that there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29), but that this One God is three distinct Persons. The Father is God (1 Corinthians 8:6), the Son (Jesus) is God (John 1:1, 14; 5:18; 20:28), and the Holy Spirit is God (2 Corinthians 3:17). Yet, there are not three gods, but one. Neither are the three Persons of the Godhead merely three different names for one Person. Nor is it three different roles fulfilled by one Person (see Luke 3:21-22). There is only one God, but within the Godhead there are three distinct Persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — all of Whom are the one God (Ephesians 4:4-6).

One theological dictionary defines the Trinity thus:

“The Christian understanding of God as triune. Trinity means that the one divine nature is a unity of three persons and that God is revealed as three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”⁴⁴

While the word “Trinity” is not used in the Bible, the concept is

taught in the Bible. Although we cannot completely understand the Trinity, we can at least state what the doctrine of the Trinity is.

The Bible. The Bible is the sufficient and authoritative revelation of God for all mankind. It is rightly called the Word of God and is inerrant in everything that it says in its original documents. This does not deny that there are things in the Bible that are difficult to understand, nor does it deny that there are things in it that may appear to be contradictory. What it does mean is that in its original manuscripts and when all the facts are known, the Bible is without error in everything it says and thus, it is our trustworthy and infallible guide for life and doctrine. Jesus is our exemplar in this for He appealed to the Word of God as authoritative, whether He was speaking to His disciples, His enemies, or the devil.

The Scripture testifies about itself, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).⁴⁵

God is Love. God is holy; He is just; He is good. However, we are told twice in 1 John 4 (verse 8 and again in verse 16) that “God is love.” In the Greek of the New Testament, this means that God’s very *nature* is love. We read, “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8).

It may not be possible to exaggerate God’s love, because it is His very nature. It was His love that motivated Him to send His Son, the Lord Jesus, to die on the Cross for our sakes. Paul prayed that the Christians in Ephesus might be “rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:17), and that they might “know the love of Christ which passes knowledge” (v. 19). Scripture tells us that, “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:5). And just three verses later, we are told, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners,

Christ died for us” (v. 8). The first characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit that Scripture mentions is love (Galatians 5:22). God is love.

MORE THAN JUST RIGHT BELIEFS

Sound doctrine includes more than just right beliefs. It encompasses actions and behavior that should result from those right beliefs. In 1 Timothy 1:9-10, the Apostle Paul lists some of the behaviors that are “contrary to sound doctrine,” including murder, fornication, homosexuality, kidnapping, and lying.

After Paul writes to Titus, “But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1), he immediately follows this, not by giving a list of beliefs, as we might expect him to do; but, rather, by exhorting what the behavior and lifestyles of various groups of believers are to be: the older men, the older women, the young women, the young men, and finally of Titus himself (vv. 2-8).

When Paul lists qualifications of an elder, overseer, or bishop (these terms are all synonymous in the New Testament), he speaks not only in terms of their beliefs, but he emphasizes their character, behavior, and attitudes (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) that are intended to accompany those beliefs. Orthodoxy — right doctrine — should entail orthopraxy — right practice.

DANGERS OF SOUND DOCTRINE UNACCOMPANIED BY OTHER THINGS

It might seem surprising to speak of the dangers of right belief bereft of other things. However, we might remember that during the earthly ministry of Jesus those who opposed Him the most were the Jewish religious leaders. Scripture tells us that, “the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4, NASB). “Dead orthodoxy” and legalism are real dangers of mere doctrinal correctness.

WHERE'S THE LOVE?

I once heard a Bible teacher tell a story about a school in another country where he had taught. The school had rules for everything and the teacher became frustrated and dissatisfied by their legalism. One day he came to his class and referred to a well-known statue in the city that he knew the students would be familiar with. Referring to the statue, the teacher said to his students, "You know, the man in the statue doesn't smoke; he doesn't drink; he doesn't run around committing sexual immorality, but he's not a Christian — because he has no life!" The Scripture says of Jesus, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Jesus said of Himself, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Doctrinal orthodoxy is vital, but it must never degenerate into dead orthodoxy — orthodoxy devoid of life is "dead right,"⁴⁶ as one Bible teacher termed it.

Besides having life, orthodoxy must also be accompanied by godliness. Recall Paul's words to Timothy: "If anyone ... does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing" (1 Timothy 6:3-4, NASB). Here, Paul speaks of "the doctrine conforming to godliness." Elsewhere, Paul tells Titus "the truth ... accords with godliness" (Titus 1:1).

And later he says:

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:11-14).

Godliness has power in it, for Scripture speaks disparagingly of some, "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5).

In addition to life and godliness, however, sound doctrine must be accompanied by love. Observe what Jesus had John write to the church at Ephesus, in the book of Revelation:

"I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place — unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Revelation 2:2-6).

Here Jesus commended the church of Ephesus for some things, including the fact that they tested those who falsely claimed to be apostles, and the Ephesian church found their claims to be false. Even at the end, Jesus commends them for their hatred of the deeds of the Nicolaitans,⁴⁷ which Jesus says that He hates also. The church at Ephesus had a lot of commendable things about it. However, Jesus says that what He has against them was that they had left their first love. It seems a little unclear as to whether Jesus means that they had left their original love *for Him* or whether they had left the fruit of love, that they had exhibited originally. But, whichever of these is the case — or perhaps it's some of both — this was very serious in the eyes of the Lord.

At the beginning of his letter to Timothy, Paul writes, "Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5). The NASB renders the first part of this verse, "But the goal of our instruction is love." Love is the goal of the apostle's instruction. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul goes to great

lengths to show that without love whatever power or knowledge or self-sacrifice a believer may exhibit, it all profits him nothing if done without love. And, after Paul extols the supremacy of love in the Christian's life, he then says, "Pursue love" (1 Corinthians 14:1). On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus said to His disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35; see also, 15:12, 17; 1 John 3:23; 4:7, 21; 2 John 1:5).

A number of years ago, artist Eddie Eddings of *The Dallas Morning News* published cartoons in the newspaper called "Vital Truth." One of his cartoons from the paper was entitled, "The Cross Exam." The 9-frame cartoon featured a man with a hat speaking with another man. Here was how their conversation progressed, with the "hat man" becoming increasingly enthusiastic with the responses of the other man, that is, up until the very last frame:

Frame 1: *Hat man*: Pardon me friend ... are you a Christian? *Other man*: Why, yes I am! Saved since I was ten!

Frame 2: *Hat man*: Mind if I inquire as to what denominational affiliation? *Other man*: Baptist. *Hat man*: That's great! So am I!

Frame 3: *Hat man*: Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist? *Other man*: Northern Baptist. *Hat man*: Great! I am too!

Frame 4: *Hat man*: Conservative or Liberal? *Other man*: Conservative. *Hat man*: Great! So am I!

Frame 5: *Hat man*: Calvinistic or Arminian? *Other man*: Calvinistic. *Hat man*: HEY! ME TOO!

Frame 6: *Hat man*: Superlapsarian⁴⁸ or Infralapsarian? *Other man*: Infralapsarian.

Frame 7: *Hat man*: That's absolutely fantastic! So am I!

Frame 8: *Hat man*: Do you adhere to the New Hampshire Confession of 1833 or the Philadelphia Confession of 1742? *Other man*: The New Hampshire Confession of 1833.

Frame 9: *Hat man* (with a look of rage): GET THEE BEHIND ME SATAN! *Other man*: ?.

In the side margin of the cartoon, are printed the words, “Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” 1 Jn. 4:24.”⁴⁹

Of course, love doesn’t mean that we turn a blind eye to sin or evil or serious doctrinal error. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul wrote that love “does not rejoice in iniquity but rejoices in the truth” (v. 6). And 1 John, which speaks of loving our fellow believers, also has much to say about discerning evil. To the Philippian believers, Paul wrote, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ” (Philippians 1:9-10). And recall that Jesus commended the church of Ephesus, regarding their good doctrinal discernment and their hatred of the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

Robert Lightner wrote:

“An epithet appears in a Latin treatise designed to uphold Lutheranism and at the same time call for peace in that church. This treatise reportedly was published in Germany sometime between 1615 and 1630. ... Translated into English it reads: In essentials, unity. In uncertainties, freedom. In all things, love.”⁵⁰

FINALLY ...

There is likely a good reason that numerous passages dealing with sound doctrine occur in the pastoral epistles because it is especially incumbent upon pastors and teachers to teach sound doctrine to the church. In line with this, Paul instructed the overseers to be “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9, NASB).

We have spoken about sound doctrine being a defense against false doctrine and heresy. However, there is also a positive side to sound

doctrine: it helps produce spiritually healthy Christians. Near the end of their book *Who Needs Theology?* the authors wrote:

“Lucy and Linus are staring out the picture window watching rain pour from the sky. With a worried look on her face, Lucy remarks, ‘Boy, look at it rain. What if it floods the whole world?’ Linus replies confidently, ‘It will never do that. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.’ Lucy looks relieved. ‘You’ve taken a great load off my mind.’ ‘Sound theology has a way of doing that!’ Linus responds matter-of-factly. Indeed, sound theology does have a way of meeting the need of the moment!”⁵¹

We close with these words from the Apostle Paul to the Ephesian elders, “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

Endnotes:

1. Email from Secret Service spokesperson, dated January 29, 2020. Correspondence on file.
2. D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, pg. xv, quoting from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1:2.
3. The Scriptures reveal that we have been living in the last days ever since the time of Jesus. See, for instance, Acts 2:15-17ff.; Hebrews 1:1-2; and James 5:1-3.
4. I am not endorsing all that Oden believed, about which I know very little; merely agreeing with his sentiment here.
5. Christopher A. Hall, interviewer, “Back to the Fathers,” *Christianity Today*, September 24, 1990, pp. 28-31.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 31.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. R.C. Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Sanford, Fla.: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2014, pp. 9-10.
10. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2014, pp. 21-22, italic in original. Fee is the author of the chapter that this quotation is from.

11. Don Matzat, *Inner Healing: Deliverance or Deception?* Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1987, pg. 155.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 157, italics in original.
13. For more on William Branham, see, J. Greg Sheryl, “The Legend of William Branham,” *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 2013, pp. 1, 10-20.
14. I am indebted to my former pastor, Sandy Adams, of Calvary Chapel Stone Mountain, who taught me this.
15. Robert Lightner, *Last Days Handbook*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997, pp. 141-142, italic in original.
16. Unfortunately, the devil can also cause us to think of Scripture that may *not* be appropriate for our situation, even as he tried to do with Jesus, in Christ’s wilderness temptations. Satan proof-texted his temptation by citing Psalm 91:11-12 (see Matthew 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-12).
17. John R.W. Stott made these very points in commenting on 1 John 2:27, “Possessing knowledge by the Spirit of truth’s direct illumination, *you do not need anyone to teach you*. ... It would not be difficult to exaggerate this statement in an incautious and unbalanced fashion. True, in the last resort the Holy Spirit is our absolutely adequate teacher, and we maintain our right of private judgment by his illumination of the Word of God. But we must see this verse in the context of a letter in which John is, in fact, teaching those who, he says, have no need of human teachers! And other passages of the New Testament refer not only to the general ministry of teaching in the church (e.g. Acts 4:18; 5:28, 42; 2 Tim. 2:24) but also to specially gifted ‘teachers’ (1 Cor. 12:29; Eph. 4:11).” John R.W. Stott, *The Letters of John*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, pp. 118-119, italics in original.
18. Justo L. González, *The Apostles’ Creed for Today*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, pp. 4-5.
19. Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2014, pg. 25.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 27, brackets in original.
21. *The Apostles’ Creed for Today*, op. cit., pg. 48.
22. *Know the Creeds and Councils*, op. cit., pg. 28.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 29.
24. *The Apostles’ Creed for Today*, op. cit., pg. 80.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 3.
27. *Ibid.*, pg. 1.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.
30. The Old Roman Creed seems to be the same Creed that González refers to above as “the Creed ... used in Rome.”
31. *Know the Creeds and Councils*, op. cit., pg. 26. (Holcomb references the Old

Roman Creed on pg. 25.) Another scholar dates our present version of the Creed later than Holcomb, stating, "It can be traced back in almost precisely its present form to the eighth century of the church, and with only slight variations as far back as the sixth." C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Apostles' Creed: A Faith to Live By*. Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1993, pg. 5.

32. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1994, pp. 61-299.

33. Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999, pp. 83-84, s.v., "Nicene Creed."

34. For a text of the Nicene Creed, see *Know the Creeds and Councils*, op. cit., pp. 35-36. A printer-friendly version of the Nicene Creed can be found online at the Loyola Press website. Accessed at: www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/traditional-catholic-prayers/prayers-every-catholic-should-know/nicene-creed/.

35. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, op. cit., pg. 31, s.v., "Councils of Nicea, Constantinople, Chalcedon."

36. *Ibid.*, pg. 15, s.v., "Arianism, Arius."

37. *Ibid.*

38. There is one difference in the Nicene Creed as used by the Western branches of Christendom and that used by the Eastern Orthodox. In the West, the Nicene Creed says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. However, the Orthodox version of the Nicene Creed

leaves off the words "and the Son." While this may seem like a minor matter to us, the Eastern Orthodox strongly objected to what they viewed as an unjustified addition of the words "and the Son" to this phrase in the Nicene Creed.

39. Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology?: An Invitation to the Study of God*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996, pg. 73.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74, italics in original.

41. *Last Days Handbook*, op. cit., pg. 52.

42. *Ibid.*, pg. 53.

43. *Ibid.*, italic in original.

44. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, op. cit., pg. 116, s.v., "Trinity."

45. In context, Paul was referring to the Old Testament Scriptures when he wrote this, because these were the Scriptures that Timothy would have understood Paul to have been referring to at that time. However, because the New Testament is now a part of the Scriptures, it would include them also, because Paul says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (emphasis added).

46. Chuck Smith, *Charisma Vs. Charismania*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1983, pg. 9, italic in original.

47. We do not know much about the Nicolaitans. They are only mentioned by name twice in the Scriptures. Once in this passage and then again later in chapter 2, where Jesus said to the church of Pergamos (or Pergamum), "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of

Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate" (vv. 14-15). So, it *may* be that the doctrine of the Nicolaitans involved eating things sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality.

48. The character in the cartoon probably intends the word, "supralapsarianism." Robert Lightner explains, "The 'Lapsarian' controversy concerns the logical order of the decrees of God. Actually there is only one decree or plan of God with many parts. Scripture simply does not state the order in which God planned the various stages of his plan." Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1991, pg. 290, endnote 5.

49. Eddie Eddings, "Vital Truth," *The Dallas Morning News*, capitalization in original. I do not have the publication information beyond this. However, this same cartoon, "The Cross Exam," is reproduced (but without the Scripture quotation and reference) slightly altered, in Eddie Eddings, *Laugh & Learn Cartoon Features for Church Publications*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991, pp. 38-39.

50. *Last Days Handbook*, op. cit., pg. 195.

51. *Who Needs Theology?*, op. cit., pg. 134.



NEWS UPDATES

(continued from page 3)

In a "2020 Governing Body Update" video posted on the Watchtower's website, Lett stated, "The spread of this disease is distressing to be sure. But we're really not surprised to see the world in the grip of such pestilence, are we? Jesus made it clear, at Luke 21:11, that pestilence would be part of the sign of the last days. And in Revelation chapter 6, the ride of the fourth horseman includes mention of deadly plague. So the events unfolding around us are making clearer than ever that we're living in the final part of the last days; undoubtedly the final part of the final part of the last days, shortly before the last day of the last days."

A former Jehovah's Witnesses, who posts to social media outlets using the name EXJW Analyzer, observed, "Mr. Lett is using the COVID-19 virus as an opportunity to further indoctrinate Jehovah's Witnesses through fear mongering into believing that we live in the last days. What Mr. Lett fails to mention, not surprisingly, is that these kinds of pandemics have happened throughout the history of humanity. And in fact, in order for this one to

be as bad as some of them in the past, about half of Europe would have to die, because that's what happened during the Black Death — the Bubonic Plague of the thirteen hundreds. But that factual information doesn't support Stephen Lett and his desire to further indoctrinate and scare Jehovah's Witnesses, in my opinion, into remaining in the faith."

The Black Death was a devastating global pandemic which struck Europe and Asia in the mid-1300s, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 75 to 200 million people. In the past two hundred years, numerous other plagues have had death tolls of more than a million people each.

On April 3, just days before "the most important observance of the year, the Memorial of Jesus' death," the Watchtower announced that for the first time ever the Lord's Evening Meal, scheduled for April 7, would be observed by videoconference. On its website, the Watchtower announced, "Because of the coronavirus pandemic, secular authorities in many lands have restricted large public gatherings. As a result, many congregations around the world have been using videoconferencing services to hold weekly meetings. These congregations

will also use videoconferencing for their celebration of the Memorial.” The announcement also indicated that for the general public, a prerecorded program regarding the service would be posted on its website.

However, Lett earlier stated in his video message, “If it’s possible in your area, we encourage you to meet with your congregation. You can be sure that the elders will take practical measures for the benefit of all those attending. Of course in some areas, local circumstances created by COVID-19 may prevent you from meeting as a congregation. In that case you may receive direction from your elders to meet in smaller groups.” According to the organization more than 20 million people attended its Memorial in 2019.

And the restrictions caused by the pandemic have frustrated other aspects of Jehovah’s Witness activity as well — namely their door-to-door evangelizing. *The New York Times* reported, “The decision to stop their ministries was the first of its kind in the nearly 150 years the group has existed. It followed anguished discussions at Watchtower headquarters, with leaders deciding March 20 that knocking on doors would leave the impression that members were disregarding the safety of those they hoped to convert.” According to one member, “People would be so receptive right now, and we can’t knock on doors.”

—MKG

BAKKER HAWKS FAKE VIRUS CURE

Televangelist Jim Bakker again found himself under the watchful eye of legal authorities — this time by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and the state attorney general from both Missouri and New York. Bakker, along with several other companies, was challenged for advertising and making available fake and ineffective cures for COVID-19. On his television program, Bakker was hawking a potion, Silver Solution, that he claimed would eliminate the disease.

According to *The Washington Post*, “The agencies’ fury stems from a Feb. 12 segment in which Bakker invited a ‘naturopathic doctor’ on the show to talk about the benefits of Silver Solution amid the coronavirus panic.” The *Post* also reported that Bakker misled “his viewers into thinking Silver Solution could keep coronavirus at bay — and possibly even ‘kill it’ within 12 hours.” On the broadcast he offered a “Birthday Special” of four 4 oz. containers of Silver Solution gel for \$80.

The FDA told Bakker that he needed to “immediately correct the violations” or else he would face “legal action, including, without limitation, seizure and injunction.” New York Attorney General Letitia James sent to

Bakker a cease-and-desist letter regarding the sale of the potion. And Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt asked a judge for a temporary restraining order to keep Bakker from selling the product.

Apparently, the legal powers got Bakker’s attention. A visit to Bakker’s website now shows that Silver Solution is no longer available on its online store. *The Kansas City Star* reported that Bakker hired several attorneys, including former Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, to fight his cause. According to the newspaper, Nixon contends that preventing Bakker from “telling his audiences that the ‘Silver Solution’ supplement can treat coronavirus infringes on his religious freedom.” Bakker’s attorneys maintain that his “religious beliefs include educating his congregation about products, including Silver Solution, that can prepare viewers for the end times.”

Bakker continues to peddle other end-time products and prophecies, including electrical generators, survival food bundles, and apocalyptic resources identifying the last days.

It appears that Bakker’s legal battles are taking a toll on the man and his ministry. According to several reports, companies are unwilling to process his credit card transactions, leaving him to ask his viewers to mail checks to him to keep his ministry going. And then on May 8, Bakker’s wife, Lori, said that he had “suffered a stroke recently and has taken a break from his show to recuperate,” according to the *Charlotte Observer*. The stroke was said to be “minor.”

In 1989, Bakker was found guilty by a federal jury on 24 counts of conspiracy and wire and mail fraud, stemming from his illegal fundraising activities. He was sentenced to 45 years in prison, which was reduced to eight years, and he ended up serving nearly five years of that sentence before being paroled in 1994. In 2003, he moved to Branson, Mo., and began broadcasting the daily “Jim Bakker Show.”

—MKG

HOWARD-BROWNE DEFIES STAY-AT-HOME ORDERS

The revivalist who called himself the “Holy Ghost bartender” recently found himself behind a different set of bars. In March, Rodney Howard-Browne, pastor of the River at Tampa Bay Church, was arrested at his home and booked into the Hernando County jail. According to the *Tampa Bay Times*, the local sheriff said Howard-Browne was arrested “on misdemeanor charges of unlawful assembly and violating quarantine orders during a public health emergency.” Following his arrest, the pastor posted \$500 bail and was released.

The *Times* further stated that, “State law allows the order to be enforced as a second-degree misdemeanor,

punishable by up to 60 days in jail, a maximum fine of \$500 or both. Hillsborough officials have said the penalties for non-compliance would likely begin with warnings and fines.”

In his March 22 sermon, Howard-Browne told his congregation that COVID-19 was a “phantom plague” created by the Chinese. Later that week, “Sheriff’s officials said they warned church lawyers ... about the ‘dangerous environment they were creating for their members and the community,’” the *Times* reported. The following Sunday, March 29, the church again held two services, even offering bus transportation to those wishing to attend. The Fox television affiliate in Tampa said, “The church’s livestream showed a packed crowd cheering and applauding.”

Earlier in the month, the church’s website posted a statement dated March 18 which said it wouldn’t be closing: “We expect our police and firefighters to be ready and available to rescue and to help and to keep the peace. The Church is another one of those essential services. It is a place where people turn for help and for comfort in a climate of fear and uncertainty. Therefore, we feel that it would be wrong for us to close our doors on them, at this time, or any time.” That post corresponded to Howard-Browne telling worshippers that he would only close services because of the Rapture and that closings were for “pansies.”

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis issued a statewide 30-day stay-at-home order on April 1, in which he stated that the restrictions were not applicable to “essential

activities,” including religious services. However, the sheriff’s department said the governor’s order was “not retroactive” and would not change the charges against Howard-Browne.

Following his arrest, Howard-Browne retained the legal services of the nonprofit Orlando-based Liberty Counsel, founded by Mat Staver. Staver, in an email titled “Liberty OR Tyranny,” stated that Howard-Browne’s “church has done more to balance worship with protecting people,” by keeping the 6-foot distance rule between family groups in its meetings, providing the church’s staff with gloves, and giving hand sanitizer to every person entering the church. It was also claimed that, “The church spent \$100,000 on a hospital-grade purification system set up throughout the church that provide continuous infectious microbial reduction that is rated to kill microbes, including those in the coronavirus family.”

In the end it appears that Howard-Browne fought the law and the law won. The Florida pastor closed his church and ceased in-person worship services. On his YouTube livestream show on April 1, Howard-Browne said his decision was not due to the COVID-19 outbreak, rather, “I have to do this to protect the congregation, not from the virus but from a tyrannical government.”

“In the appropriate time, when I get the release from the Lord, we will open up again. I’m just following what the Lord is telling me to do,” the *Washington Post* reported Howard-Browne as saying.

—MKG

Personal Freedom Outreach – Statement of Belief

- I. The Bible as the divinely inspired, inerrant Word of God: It is in its entirety the sole authority for all matters of Christian belief and practice.
- II. The one true God. In the one true God there exist three persons, being: The Father, The Son Jesus Christ, and The Holy Spirit.
- III. Jesus Christ: His deity, humanity, virgin birth, sinlessness, death and bodily resurrection; who will personally and visibly return again to earth.
- IV. The personality and deity of the Holy Spirit.
- V. The existence and personality of Satan, his total opposition to God, and his power over the unregenerate.
- VI. The complete and total depravity of all men which makes them hopelessly lost without the new birth obtainable through faith in Jesus Christ.
- VII. The final estate of man: for the saved, everlasting life in the presence of God and for the unsaved, everlasting punishment because of their unbelief.
- VIII. The Gospel by which we are saved being summed in the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- IX. The Church being the Body of Christ, united in the Holy Spirit, consisting of those who have received Jesus Christ as Savior. A local church is an organized assembly of believers united for the purpose of carrying out the Great Commission of Christ.
- X. The Great Commission of Christ being to preach the Gospel to all men, baptizing and discipling those who have believed.



Books in Review

URBAN LEGENDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

by David A. Croteau

B&H Academic, 255 pages, \$14.99

"A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on," preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said in an 1855 sermon as he quoted a popular axiom of his time. In today's world of instant telecommunication and social media, misinformation and hearsay can travel faster than ever. Count urban legends, humorous or horrific stories, or information circulated as though true, among the jetsam and flotsam plaguing our society today.

But could the Bible be a source of urban legends? According to New Testament and Greek language professor David Croteau, when one neglects a Scripture passage's context or misuses historical background information or misunderstands the Greek language, that's what we get: a Bible "truth" circulated as though true but not true. Croteau examines the New Testament and has collected what he sees as 40 of the most commonly misinterpreted passages.

He designates two types of legends: one that is wholly inaccurate, the other that is partially true but incomplete. His inventory of biblical urban legends ranges from ones that most Christians will or should know — such as how many "kings" from the "Orient" visited Jesus in Bethlehem after His birth (we don't know) — to others that are more perplexing and theologically profound, like does "repent" mean to change your mind and is grace unmerited favor.

In each analyses, he sets forth the legendary teaching of a particular verse, and then responds in various ways by unraveling the legend by looking at the context, historical setting, and/or language of the passage for a sound interpretation, before presenting a supportive application. In so many instances, it all comes down to context. For example, in dealing with the often used passage of Matthew 18:20 — that when two or three are gathered in prayer, God will be there — he explains that this passage is not about prayer, but rather about church discipline.

The response to other legends that will garner interest because of their widespread use include: do not judge

others (Matthew 7:1), *agape* is a superior love to *phileo* (John 21:15-19), abstain from all appearance of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22), Christians are commanded to tithe (Hebrews 7:1-10), and Christians should not allow cults into their homes (2 John 10).

Also explored is the misunderstanding of Philippians 2:6-7, that Jesus emptied Himself of the glory of heaven. If there is any inadequacy in the book, it may be in this entry. Here the focus of the topic is *harpagmos* (something to be grasped) while *kenosis* (emptied Himself) is bypassed. A wrong understanding of this latter Greek word is basic to those with an aberrant or heretical teaching regarding the nature of Christ.

Croteau has done his homework well and the reader will benefit from his meticulous fact-finding. The book is loaded with so much careful study, thorough research, and biblical wisdom. It is a plea to avoid careless interpretations and applications of Scripture and to be that unashamed workman who rightly divides the Word of Truth. He reminds us, "Every word of Scripture is inspired, and every word is important for a correct interpretation. Missing one little word can change the entire meaning of a passage" (pg. 76).

Each entry concludes with an "annotated bibliography" of additional resources, including books, periodicals, and website articles specific to the subject. In his list of references, Croteau often mentions the difficulty level of the cited resource, from the ones "written with a broad audience in mind" to others that are "written at a highly technical level."

On several pages are QR codes: matrix barcodes which consist of black and white squares to access information by the camera on a smartphone. When the code is scanned with a mobile device, a short video of the author summarizing the content of the chapter is played.

And after all this, Croteau doesn't just leave the reader knowing what's fact and what's fiction. In the book's epilogue he provides "advice about how to address legends when you hear them." The volume includes three separate indexes: names, subjects, and Scripture verses.

Every Bible student should have a section in his or her library which includes at least a handful of publications that examine and answer supposed discrepancies, alleged contradictions, and difficult sayings found in Scripture. *Urban Legends of the New Testament* is, without question, a volume that should be in that section.

—MKG

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