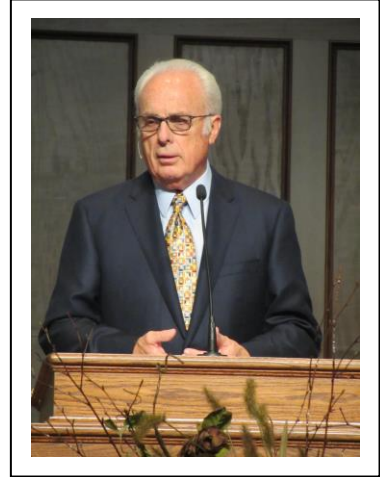


The Rise of Reckless Faith

JOHN F. MACARTHUR

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A few summers ago I drove across the country to deliver my son's car to him. He was playing minor-league baseball in Florida and needed his car for local transportation. The cross-country trip fit perfectly with some previously scheduled ministry engagements on my calendar, so I took my assistant, Lance Quinn, and together we made the journey. As we drove through Lance's home state of Arkansas, our route took us off the main highways and through some beautiful rural country. We topped one hill and I noticed near a very rustic house a homemade sign advertising hand-sewn quilts. I had hoped to stop somewhere along the way to buy an anniversary gift for my wife. She likes hand-made crafts and had been wanting a quilt. So we decided to stop and look.



We went to the door of the old house and knocked. A friendly woman with a dishtowel answered the door. When we told her we were interested in quilts, she swung the door open wide and ushered us in. She showed us into the living room, where she had several quilts on display.

The television set in the corner was on, tuned in to a religious broadcast. The woman's husband was lounging in a recliner, half watching the program and half reading a religious magazine. Around the room were piles of religious books, religious literature, and religious videotapes. I recognized one or two of the books—resources from solid evangelical publishers. The woman left the room to get some more quilts to show us, so the man put aside his magazine and greeted us. "I was just catching up on some reading," he said.

"Are you a believer?" I asked.

"A believer in *what*?" he asked, apparently startled that I would ask.

"A believer in Christ," I said. "I noticed your books. Are you a Christian?"

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“Well, sure,” he said, holding up the magazine he was reading. I recognized it as the publication of a well-known cult. I took a closer look at the stacks of material around the room. There were a few evangelical best-sellers, materials from several media ministries, a promotional magazine from a leading evangelical seminary, and even some helpful Bible-study aids. But mixed in with all that were stacks of *The Watch Tower* magazines published by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a copy of *Dianetics* (the book by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard), a *Book of Mormon*, some literature from the Franciscan brothers, and an incredible array of stuff from nearly every conceivable cult and “ism.” I watched as he jotted down the address of the television preacher who was at that moment offering some free literature.

“You read from quite an assortment of material,” I observed. “These all represent different beliefs. Do you accept any one of them?”

“I find there’s good in all of it,” he said. “I read it all and just look for the good.”

While this conversation was going on, the woman had come back with a stack of quilts and was ready to show them to us. The first quilt she laid out was a patchwork of all different sizes, colors, and prints of fabric scraps. I looked at it, trying to see some kind of pattern or design in it, but there was none. The color combinations even seemed to clash. The quilt itself was—well, ugly.

I described for her the kind of quilt I was looking for, and she pulled one out that was exactly what I wanted. Her price seemed reasonable, so I told her I would take it.

As she wrapped up my purchase, I couldn’t help looking again at that first quilt she had brought out from the back room. Frankly, it was the *least* attractive of all her quilts. But she was obviously quite proud of it, having labored over it for hours. It was evidently her personal favorite—and undoubtedly a genuine piece of folk art. But I couldn’t imagine anyone else being attracted to that particular quilt.

Her quilt, I thought, was a perfect metaphor for her husband’s religion. Taking bits and pieces from every conceivable source, he was putting together a patchwork faith. He thought of his religion as a thing of beauty, but in God’s eyes it was an abomination.

Our generation is exposed to more religious ideas than any people in history. Religious broadcasting and the print media bombard people with all kinds of deviant teachings that claim to be truth. In the area where I live, for example, we are assaulted with everything from Gene Scott—a vulgar, cigar-chomping television preacher whose messages are peppered with profanity—to huge billboards declaring “islam is truth.” The

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undiscerning person has no means of determining *what* is truth, and many are baffled by the variety.

It is no wonder that people apart from Christ would be confused by such teachings. But why would people who believe the Bible and affirm that Jesus is Lord of all be led astray or confounded by competing doctrines?

Yet many professing Christians *are* perplexed by the lies. The church today is filled with people who lack any ability to differentiate the very worst false doctrines from truth. I constantly encounter Christians who are at a loss to answer the most profound errors they hear from cultists, unorthodox media preachers, or other sources of false doctrine. Too many people are like the man fashioning a patchwork religion, sifting through stacks of religious ideas, looking for what is good in all of it.

This is inexcusable. Scripture warns that the church will be inundated with doctrines of demons, destructive heresies, myths, falsehoods, perverse teachings, commandments of men, human traditions, empty philosophy, vain deceit, speculations, lying spirits, worldly fables, false knowledge, and worldly wisdom. Jesus said false prophets would come as wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). Paul told the elders at Ephesus that savage wolves would enter in, not sparing the flock (Acts 20:29). "And *from among your own selves,*" he added, "men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (v. 30, emphasis added). He wrote Timothy and said, "Evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). He also wrote, "The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1).

Yet the contemporary church is virtually impotent to face such an onslaught. An almost inexhaustible gullibility has destroyed people's will to be discerning. The visible church is shot through with confusion and error. You might think that the televangelist scandals that began in the 1980s would have made people wary, but that does not seem to have been the long-term effect. As soon as one televised charlatan is discredited, someone even more bizarre comes along to fill the time slot—with higher-than-ever audience approval ratings.

In the previous chapter we looked at some of the philosophical errors that underlie the decline of discernment and the rise of reckless faith in the church. Now let's examine some of the *practical* reasons for these trends.

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THE WEAKENING OF DOCTRINAL CLARITY

Several of my previous books have documented the decline of any emphasis on sound doctrine in the church. Modern church leaders seem obsessed with methodology, psychology, pragmatics, attendance figures, felt needs, popularity polls, and the like—all to the detriment of biblical doctrine. And when doctrinal understanding declines, real discernment becomes impossible.



Jesus made that very point with the religious leaders of His day. Matthew 16:1–4 records this:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Him asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He answered and said to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.” And He left them, and went away.

Their limited, primitive, non-scientific knowledge of meteorology exceeded their spiritual discernment! As little as they knew about predicting the weather, they were better weathermen than they were discerners. They had no ability to distinguish the “signs of the times”—the great spiritual realities that were unfolding right before their eyes! And Jesus condemned them for it. In effect He said, “I have nothing to offer you.” He refused to give them any sign; He simply turned and left them.

How can we explain the biblical illiteracy of the Sadducees and Pharisees? They were extremely religious. The Pharisees in particular were fastidious about insisting on all the details of their law. But in all their spiritual calisthenics, they missed the main message. Consequently they rejected their Messiah. They are proof that generating religious *activity* is no substitute for love of *truth*.

The Jewish leaders adhered to the brand of reckless faith that favors rote tradition. They did not teach people to think biblically, to search the Scriptures thoroughly, to test everything, to discern between truth and error. Instead, they issued a set of rules and told people to live accordingly. Many of their laws and rules were nothing but human inventions added to Moses’ law. And like most legalists, the rulers of the Jews were prone to extreme hypocrisy. Jesus denounced them in the strongest language: “You weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers” (Luke 11:46).

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Sometimes the Pharisees are accused of being overly concerned with orthodoxy. But that was not at all where they went astray. Their error was that they became so wrapped up in their own traditions that they *downplayed* the truth of Scripture and distorted sound doctrine. Far from being theologically orthodox, they had simply invented their own traditions and used a man-made system to nullify the truth of divinely inspired Scripture (Matt. 15:3–6).

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It is fashionable today to characterize anyone who is concerned with biblical doctrine as Pharisaical. The biblical condemnation of the Pharisees' legalism has been misread as a denunciation of doctrinal precision. And love of the truth has often been judged inherently legalistic.

But love for truth is *not* the same as legalism. The fact that it has been portrayed that way has sabotaged the very thing the church so desperately needs today. Too many Christians are content to gaze nonchalantly at the surface of scriptural truth without plunging any deeper. They often justify their shallow indifference as a refusal to be legalistic. Conversely, they dismiss as pharisaical narrow-mindedness any attempt to declare the truth authoritatively. Doctrine divides; therefore any concern for doctrinal matters is commonly seen as unchristian. People concerned with discernment and sound doctrine are often accused of fostering a pharisaical, divisive attitude.

But that is exactly backward! True unity is *rooted* in truth. Jesus prayed: "*Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth... For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one*" (John 17:17–21, emphasis added). The unity for which He prayed is preceded by and grows out of sanctification in the truth. Fellowship that ignores or glosses over the crucial doctrines of the faith is not Christian unity; it is ungodly compromise.

As doctrine has been deemphasized, the church has moved from preaching the Word to other activities: drama, music, entertainment—things designed to evoke an emotional response rather than enlighten the mind. The charismatic movement has supplanted doctrine with experience. Psychology has elevated "felt" needs over *real* needs and behavioral theory over revealed truth. All this has accelerated the move away from doctrine and focused the pulpit message on everything *but* the objective truth of Scripture. Preachers have become comedians, storytellers, therapists, showmen, and entertainers rather than powerful envoys of divine truth.

In some circles, this trend has been heralded as a great step forward. David Watson, an influential leader of the evangelical movement in the Church of England until his death in 1984, believed music and drama could be used more effectively than preaching and

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writing to communicate to unbelievers. He explained why he traveled with a drama and music team: "They are able to communicate the gospel much more effectively than I could with mere words.... Most churches rely heavily on the spoken or written word for communication and then wonder why so few people find the Christian faith to be relevant."¹

What does that mean? That the written word and the spoken word make the Christian faith irrelevant? That our faith is something subjective (a feeling or emotion) that can be better communicated through music, drama, and art forms—rather than by the straightforward proclamation of objective truth?

Recently I watched a televised evangelistic meeting that featured music, celebrity appearances, and a brief message where the preacher told stories, cracked jokes, and played on the emotions of the audience. No reference was made to the issue of sin, no mention of the cross, no call to repentance—in fact, there were only scant references to Scripture, and they had nothing to do with any of the central issues of the gospel. Nothing was said that would remotely challenge the unbelief or sin of non-Christians. Incredibly, however, an invitation was given and people streamed forward to make professions of faith. What were they saying? That they were moved emotionally? That they wanted a religious experience?

Can we really view such a response as evidence of conversion? Can people become Christians on the basis of a message devoid of any gospel truth? Can someone who has never known real conviction of sin trust Christ as Savior in any meaningful sense? Is a walk down the aisle at a religious meeting the same thing as true conversion? Is just any kind of emotional experience as good as genuine repentance?

The state of affairs is such in the church today that multitudes who profess faith in Christ cannot even articulate the most basic issues of the gospel. I once met a man who told me he had been active for nine years in a charismatic businessmen's organization. He had heard that I was critical of the charismatic movement, and he wanted to urge me to be more tolerant. "Life is like a long, dark stairway," he told me. "We all climb the stairs in the dark, feeling our way along. At the top is a door. You knock on the door and just hope Jesus comes and lets you in. Let's not fight each other while we are feeling our way around in the dark."

That man did not believe truth is knowable. He opposed doctrinal clarity because he believed in the final analysis all we can do is make our best guess about what is true, then

¹ Cited in Iain Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith, 1939–1981* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 667.

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just hope we get it right. We can't really *know* anything, though. The actual name for that view is *skepticism*, and it is not a Christian position.

On another occasion, I was the guest on a two-hour radio talk show. I had been invited to discuss a book I had written, in which I had stated that psychology has no legitimate role in the process of sanctification. The host was a very pleasant woman whom I had not met before. She was dumbfounded by my opposition to psychology. "You don't mean you think being a Christian solves all the problems of life at once, do you?" she asked.

No, I assured her, but it does solve the core problem—the problem of sin and our resulting alienation from God. Then from conversion on, the process of sanctification conforms us more and more to the image of Christ. Whatever spiritual problems remain after conversion are addressed by the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work through the Word of God. I pointed out that it is actually counterproductive to treat spiritual problems as if they were non-moral, non-spiritual, purely psychological issues.

I went on to say that the first step toward genuine spiritual health is to recognize your sinfulness. Then I gave a brief synopsis of what happens when a person becomes a Christian: You acknowledge that you cannot save yourself. You repent of your sins. You cast yourself on the mercy of God. And you believe in Jesus Christ as God's Son who came into the world and died to pay sin's penalty, then rose again as Lord of all.

That triggered a rather amazing response from her. "Surely you don't believe every person who becomes a Christian must believe all *that*, do you?"

I said, "Well, yes—YES!"

"But I wasn't even aware that I was a sinner when I became a Christian," she said. "That thought never occurred to me. Sin wasn't even an issue in my thinking."

"Then how were you saved, and what were you saved from?" I asked.

This was her reply: "I was into drugs, alcohol, and living with my boyfriend. I had been involved in metaphysics, Science of the Mind, for years. My life just wasn't working. Then one day I simply got Jesus' phone number. That's it."

"You simply got Jesus' phone number?" I asked, hoping for some clarification.

"Yes!" she replied. "Suddenly I just knew He was there, and that He could help me sort out my life. So I gave Him a call."

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I pointed out that Jesus Himself said He came to call sinners to repentance, and that it is not those who are whole who need a physician, but those who are sick (Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31). I reiterated that salvation is offered exclusively to people who sense the guilt of their sin—those who labor and are heavy-laden under the weight of sin (Matt. 11:28–30).

She broke for a commercial, then changed the subject.

After the program ended, I reiterated the content of the gospel for her and urged her to begin filling her mind with the *content* of Scripture. Her Christianity was nothing more than a feeling, altogether subjective. She couldn't even communicate the gospel clearly to her listening audience. She was spreading reckless faith.

What is left for the church if we can't even get our doctrine clear at the level of the gospel? Is it not obvious that such doctrinal shallowness undermines people's ability to discern?

That is precisely why Paul told Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). The contemporary assault on doctrine is a rejection of this command. It is ultimately a denial of God Himself. Or, as Christian philosopher Gordon Clark wrote, "Since God is truth, a contempt for truth is equally a contempt for God."²

Again, emphatically, none of this suggests that love and unity are unimportant. We must be loving. We must seek unity. We must reflect the long-suffering of God and the meekness of our Savior. But all of that must be built on a foundation of non-negotiable truth.

A few years ago a man sent me his doctoral dissertation. He was analyzing preaching styles and had used me as an example of expository preaching (preaching that aims to set forth the *meaning* of a passage of Scripture). In his final assessment he concluded that the expository preaching model is "biblical but not relevant." How can anything be both biblical and irrelevant? What does this say about our attitude toward the Word of God?

When doctrine declines, people's thinking grows fuzzy. People who are confused about the truth have absolutely no hope of being careful discerners. When doctrine is relegated to secondary status, it is inevitable that discernment will wane.

THE DISPARAGEMENT OF STRONG CONVICTIONS

A closely related second reason for the low level of discernment in the church today is the reluctance to take a definitive stand on any issue. Those with any convictions at all

² Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education* (Jefferson, Md.: Trinity Foundation, 1988), 158.

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are supposed to hold those beliefs with as much slack as possible. Dogmatism is not permitted. To pronounce anything *true* and call its antithesis *error* is to challenge society's only remaining dogma. Refuse to equivocate on any point of principle or doctrine, and you will be labeled too narrow. Zeal for the truth has become politically incorrect.

In the secular world it is often thought uncouth to voice any opinion at all on spiritual, moral, or ethical matters. A plethora of Phil Donahue-style talk shows exist to remind us of this fact, and they do so by parading in front of us the most bizarre and extreme advocates of every radical "alternative lifestyle" imaginable. We are not supposed to condemn these people; the whole point is to broaden our minds and raise our level of tolerance. Anyone who responds negatively is viewed with the same contempt that used to be reserved for bigots and religious hypocrites.

The other day one of these programs broadcast a show featuring bearded lesbians. A petite woman was seated on the stage sporting a thick black beard and full moustache. All her other physical attributes, her voice, and her clothing were fully feminine. She declared that she was proud of the beard and really didn't care what anyone else thought of it. Besides, her lesbian lover found facial hair attractive. She said she was actually taking hormones to make her beard grow even thicker.

A teenage girl in the audience timidly stated that she thought it was unfortunate that the bearded woman was purposely alienating herself from mainstream society. She suggested that the woman might really be happier if she stopped the hormone treatments and underwent electrolysis instead.

At that the studio audience turned disagreeable. Several people booed the teenage girl. Another woman from the audience, her voice choked with emotion, scolded the teenager: "How *dare* you criticize this beautiful creature! Who are you to tell her how she should look? Society shouldn't impose arbitrary standards on people. Everyone should be free to be whatever they want to be."

The audience responded with sustained applause. The bearded woman grinned triumphantly. And the teenage girl sat down in shame.

The culture around us has declared war on all standards, and the church is unwittingly following suit. It has become quite popular among Christians to assert that almost nothing is really black and white. Virtually all issues of right and wrong, true and false, good and bad are painted in shades of gray. Many Christians assume this is the proper way of understanding truth. It is, once again, a capitulation to the relativism of an existential culture.

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Any tone of certainty is offensive to some people. A few years ago I did a live radio interview where listeners were invited to phone in. One caller told me, “You seem like a lot nicer person than I thought you were by listening to your sermons.” He meant it kindly, and I took it in that spirit. But I was curious to know what he had heard in my preaching that he interpreted as not nice. (When I preach, I am certainly not mean or hateful. Besides, if I ever did say anything unkind or malicious, our staff would edit it out of the tape. So I asked what he meant.)

“I don’t know,” he said. “In your sermons, you sound so opinionated, so dogmatic. But this afternoon you’re more conversational. You just sound nicer.” Like many people today, he thought of dialogue as “nicer” than a sermon.

I once met a pastor who cringed every time anyone used the word *preaching*. “I don’t preach,” he would insist. “I *share*.” Somehow “sharing” seemed more polite to him than “preaching.”

That is the mood of this generation. It reflects the philosophy and the culture of existentialism. It is no accident that the church has moved away from emphatically proclaiming truth. That shift is an accommodation to the unbelieving spirit of our age. Narrowness and dogmatism are unacceptable in a society that views truth as a personal matter. After all, existentialism rules out any universal truth. And that makes strong conviction seem haughty and inappropriate.

Compromise is therefore what drives this pragmatic age. In most people’s minds, the very word *compromise* is rich with positive connotations. Obviously, in the realm of social and political discourse, compromise can certainly be helpful, even constructive. Compromise lubricates the political machinery of secular government. The art of compromise is the key to successful negotiations in business. And even in marriage, small compromises are often necessary for a healthy relationship.

But when it comes to biblical issues, moral principles, theological truth, divine revelation, and other spiritual absolutes, compromise is *never* appropriate.

The church, caught up in the existentialism of our age, is losing sight of that reality. In recent years evangelicals have embraced compromise as a tool for church growth, a platform for unity, and even a test of spirituality. Take an uncompromising stance on almost any doctrinal or biblical issue, and a chorus of voices will call you obstinate, unkind, heartless, contentious, or unloving, no matter how irenically you frame your argument.

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Did I say “argument”? Many people have the false idea that Christians are never supposed to be argumentative. We’re not supposed to engage in polemics. I hear this frequently: “Why don’t you just state truth in positive terms and ignore the views you disagree with? Why not steer clear of controversy, forget the negatives, and present everything affirmatively?”

I first began to realize the force of this trend more than a decade ago. A well-known pastor published an excellent devotional book in which he incidentally pointed out the fallacy of presenting Christ’s lordship only as an option to be considered after conversion. The entire book devoted a few scant paragraphs to the so-called “lordship controversy,” but in that context, the pastor cited an eminent seminary professor whose writings have contributed greatly to widespread confusion on the issue. The pastor was very objective and wrote with a charitable tone, but he took an opposing view.

Shortly after the book came out, I was expressing my appreciation to the publisher. To my surprise, the editor responsible for the book told me he was sorry they had published it. When I probed, he told me the company had been hit with some highly placed criticism about the book. Friends of the seminary professor were outraged that he had been named in a footnote by someone who disagreed with him. Even the book’s editor said, “I see now that the pastor was very unkind to the seminary professor.”

I went back and re-read the offending passage carefully. The pastor’s inflection was as thoroughly benevolent as I had recalled. Nothing in it could reasonably be construed as unfair or ungracious. It was certainly not “unkind.” The pastor had correctly cited a published work. He had adequately and straightforwardly represented the professor’s teaching. He was simply expressing an honest but crucial disagreement.

Unfortunately, it is no longer permissible to deal with biblical issues in an uncompromising fashion. Those who dare to take an unpopular stand, declare truth in a definitive way—or worst of all, express disagreement with someone else’s teaching—will inevitably be marked as troublesome. Compromise has become a virtue while devotion to truth has become offensive.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones called the modern distrust of polemics “very loose and very false and very flabby thinking.... The attitude of many seems to be, ‘We do not want these arguments. Give us the simple message, the simple gospel. Give it to us positively, and do not bother about other views.’”³

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3.20–4.25: Atonement and Justification* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 113.

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Lloyd-Jones responded to those sentiments: "It is important that we should realize that if we speak like that we are denying the Scriptures. The Scriptures are full of arguments, full of polemics."⁴ He went on:

Disapproval of polemics in the Christian Church is a very serious matter. But that is the attitude of the age in which we live. The prevailing idea today in many circles is not to bother about these things. As long as we are all Christians, anyhow, somehow, all is well. Do not let us argue about doctrine, let us all be Christians together and talk about the love of God. That is really the whole basis of ecumenicity. Unfortunately, that same attitude is creeping into evangelical circles also and many say that we must not be too precise about these things.... If you hold that view you are criticizing the Apostle Paul, you are saying that he was wrong, and at the same time you are criticizing the Scriptures. The Scriptures argue and debate and dispute; they are full of polemics.⁵

Lloyd-Jones added this helpful qualifier:

Let us be clear about what we mean. This is not argument for the sake of argument; this is not a manifestation of an argumentative spirit; this is not just indulging one's prejudices. The Scriptures do not approve of that, and furthermore the Scriptures are very concerned about the spirit in which one engages in discussion. No man should like argument for the sake of argument. We should always regret the necessity; but though we regret and bemoan it, when we feel that a vital matter is at stake we must engage in argument. We must "earnestly contend for the truth," and we are called upon to do that by the New Testament.⁶

Obviously not *every* issue is cast in black and white. There are many questions to which Scripture does not explicitly speak. For example, should Christians watch television? Nothing in Scripture forbids it. But clearly television poses certain dangers for the Christian. And there *are* principles in Scripture that can help us discern what kinds of things we should watch and how we should interact with what we see. But there is no express rule given to govern how much or how little television we should watch. It is a gray area.

But many of the issues being compromised among Christians today are *not* questionable. These are *not* gray areas. There is no room for compromise here. Scripture speaks very clearly against homosexuality, for example. The Christian position on adultery is not at

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 113–14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

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all vague. The question of whether a believer ought to marry an unbeliever is spelled out with perfect clarity. Scripture quite plainly forbids any Christian to take another Christian to court. Selfishness and pride are explicitly identified as sins.

Yet in recent weeks I have seen every one of those issues treated as a gray area—on Christian radio, on Christian television, and in Christian literature. People want all such matters to be negotiable. And too many Christian leaders willingly oblige. They hesitate to speak with authority on matters where Scripture is plain. The lines of distinction between truth and error, wisdom and foolishness, and church and world are being obliterated.

The truth is that far more things are black-and-white issues than most people realize. Most of the truths of God's Word are explicitly contrasted with opposing ideas. Jay Adams calls this the principle of *antithesis*, and he points out that it is fundamental to genuine discernment:

In the Bible, where antithesis is so important, discernment—the ability to distinguish God's thoughts and God's ways from all others—is essential. Indeed, God says that “the wise in heart will be called discerning” (Proverbs 16:21).

From the Garden of Eden with its two trees (one allowed, one forbidden) to the eternal destiny of the human being in heaven or in hell, the Bible sets forth two, and only two, ways: God's way, and all others. Accordingly, people are said to be saved or lost. They belong to God's people or the world. There was Gerizim, the mount of blessing, and Ebal, the mount of cursing. There is the narrow way and the wide way, leading either to eternal life or to destruction. There are those who are against and those who are with us, those within and those without. There is life and death, truth and falsehood, good and bad, light and darkness, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, love and hatred, spiritual wisdom and the wisdom of the world. Christ is said to be the way, the truth, and the life, and no one may come to the Father but by Him. His is the only name under the sky by which one may be saved.⁷

Adams suggests that such antithetical teaching is found “on nearly every page of the Bible.”⁸ “People who study the Bible in depth develop antithetical mindsets: They think in terms of contrasts or opposites.”⁹ He believes that the Old Testament laws distinguishing between clean and unclean animals have a distinct purpose. Regulations

⁷ Jay E. Adams, *A Call to Discernment* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1987), 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

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governing choices in clothing, health care, and other matters of daily life were not arbitrary, but were meant to cause God's people to think constantly about the difference between God's ways and the world's way—"to develop in God's people an antithetical mentality."¹⁰

I agree. All truth sets itself against error. Where Scripture speaks, it speaks with authority. It speaks definitively. It speaks decisively. It calls for absolute conviction. It demands that we submit to God and resist the devil (James 4:7). It urges us to discern between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6). It commands us to turn away from evil and do good (1 Peter 3:11). It calls us to reject the broad way that seems right to the human mind (Prov. 14:12; 16:25) and follow the narrow way prescribed by God (Matt. 7:13–14). It tells us that our ways are not God's ways, nor are our thoughts His thoughts (Isa. 55:8). It orders us to protect the truth and reject lies (Rom. 1:25). It declares that no lie is of the truth (1 John 2:21). It guarantees that the righteous shall be blessed and the wicked perish (Ps. 1:1, 6). And it reminds us that "friendship with the world is hostility toward God" (James 4:4).

Discernment demands that where Scripture speaks with clarity, a hard line must be drawn. Christ is against human philosophy, against empty deception, against human tradition, and against the elementary principles of this world (Col. 2:8). Those things cannot be integrated with true Christian belief; they must be repudiated and steadfastly resisted. Scripture demands that we make a definitive choice: "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve ... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15).

The modern canonization of compromise represents a detour down a dead-end alley. Both Scripture and church history reveal the danger of compromise. Those whom God uses are invariably men and women who swim against the tide. They hold strong convictions with great courage and refuse to compromise in the face of incredible opposition. David stubbornly refused to tremble before Goliath; he saw Goliath as an affront to God. While all Israel cowered in fear, David stood alone before the enemy. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego all courageously refused the easy path of compromise. It would surely have cost them their lives if God had not sovereignly intervened. Yet they never wavered.

Where are the men and women today with the courage to stand alone? The church in our age has abandoned the confrontive stance. Instead of overturning worldly wisdom with revealed truth, many Christians today are obsessed with finding areas of agreement. The

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

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goal has become *integration* rather than *confrontation*. As the church absorbs the values of secular culture, it is losing its ability to differentiate between good and evil. What will happen to the church if everyone proceeds down the slippery path of public opinion?

It is interesting to speculate what the church would be like today if Martin Luther had been prone to compromise. The pressure was heavy on him to tone down his teaching, soften his message, and stop poking his finger in the eye of the papacy. Even many of his friends and supporters urged Luther to come to terms with Rome for the sake of harmony in the church. Luther himself prayed earnestly that the effect of his teaching would not just be divisive—but that the truth would triumph. When he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door, the last thing he wanted to do was split the church.

Yet sometimes division is fitting, even healthy. Especially in times like Luther's—and like ours—when the visible church seems full of counterfeit Christians, it is right for the true people of God to declare themselves. There is no room for compromise.

Discernment demands that we hold biblical convictions with the most fervent tenacity. Titus 1:9 says a basic requirement for every elder is that he be the kind of man who “[holds] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” It is thus mandated by God that we take issue with error. We must refute those who contradict, or we do not fulfill our divine calling.

In other words, truly biblical ministry *must* hold forth truths that are absolute. We must take an unmovable stance on all issues where the Bible speaks plainly. What if people don't like such dogmatism? It is necessary anyway. Sound doctrine divides, it confronts, it separates, it judges, it convicts, it reproves, it rebukes, it exhorts, it refutes error. None of those things is very highly esteemed in modern thought. But the health of the church depends on our holding firmly to the truth, for where strong convictions are not tolerated, discernment cannot survive.

A REFUSAL TO SHUN THE WORLD

We have already hinted at another factor contributing to the decline of discernment in the contemporary church. It is a preoccupation with image and influence. Many Christians have the misconception that to win the world to Christ we must first win the world's favor. If we can get the world to like us, they will embrace our Savior. That is the

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philosophy behind the user-friendly church movement, which I have evaluated in an earlier book.¹¹

The express design of this user-friendly philosophy is to make unconverted sinners feel comfortable with the Christian message. People won't come to hear the Gospel proclaimed? Give them something they want. Put on a show. Entertain them. Avoid sensitive subjects like sin and damnation. Accommodate their worldly desires and felt needs. Slip in the Gospel in small, diluted doses. The whole point is to make the church a place where non-Christians can enjoy themselves. The strategy is to tantalize non-Christians rather than confront their unbelief. That is altogether incompatible with sound doctrine. It is compromise with the world. James called it spiritual adultery (James 4:4).

Look at the effect of this philosophy on the church. In order to entice sinners, preaching has been replaced with entertainment. The preacher who once took his stand for truth and made the biblical message clear is now asked to take his seat. He's a problem. He's an embarrassment. He's an offense to non-Christians.

But if the truth cannot be fearlessly proclaimed in the church, what place is there for truth at all? How can we build a generation of discerning Christians if we are terror-struck at the thought that non-Christians might not like hearing the unvarnished truth?

And since when has it been legitimate for the church to woo the world? Didn't the apostle John write, "Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you" (1 John 3:13)? And did not Jesus say, "The world ... hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil" (John 7:7)? Biblical Christians have always understood that they must shun the world. Here are our Lord's own words:

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me (John 15:18–21).

Does that sound like it gives any latitude for an evangelistic strategy that soft-pedals the offense of the cross?

The apostle Paul frankly would have had no patience for such tactics. He never sought to win the world through intellectual acceptance, personal popularity, image, status,

¹¹ *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1993).

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reputation, or things of that sort. He wrote, “We have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now” (1 Cor. 4:13). Is the contemporary church right to attempt a “more sophisticated” approach? Dare we set ourselves apart from the godly men of the past, all of whom had to fight for the truth?

Charles Spurgeon said,

We want again Luthers, Calvins, Bunyans, Whitefields, men fit to mark eras, whose names breathe terror in our [foes'] ears. We have dire need of such. Whence will they come to us? They are the gifts of Jesus Christ to the Church, and will come in due time. He has power to give us back again a golden age of preachers, a time as fertile of great divines and mighty ministers as was the Puritan age, and when the good old truth is once more preached by men whose lips are touched as with a live coal from off the altar, this shall be the instrument in the hand of the Spirit for bringing about a great and thorough revival of religion in the land.

I do not look for any other means of converting men beyond the simple preaching of the gospel and the opening of men's ears to hear it. *The moment the Church of God shall despise the pulpit, God will despise her.*¹²

And, we might add, the moment any church sets out to make friends with the world, that church sets itself at enmity with God (James 4:4).

In practical terms, the movement to accommodate the world has diminished Christians' confidence in divinely revealed truth. If we can't trust the preaching of God's Word to convert the lost and build the church, how can we trust the Bible at all—even as a guide for our daily living? People are learning from the example of some of their church leaders that faithfulness to the Word of God is optional.

Furthermore, as biblical preaching continues to diminish, ignorance of Scripture grows. An increase in biblical illiteracy leads inevitably to the rise of reckless faith.

We cannot avoid being an offense to the world and still remain faithful to the gospel. The gospel is inherently offensive. Christ Himself is offensive to unbelievers. He is an offense to all in error. He is an offense to all who reject the truth. He is “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed” (1 Peter 2:8). The message of the cross is also a stumbling

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Volume 1: The Early Years* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1962 edition), v (emphasis added).

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block (Gal. 5:11)—“For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:18).

“But to us who are being saved [the message of the cross] is the power of God.” Paul wrote, “May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

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Christians today do not speak in such terms. Few today have any concept of being crucified to the world. The word *worldliness* has lost its evil connotation. When did you last hear anyone call worldliness a sin?

James’s words are worth citing once more: “Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Church history confirms this again and again. Making friends with the world is a fast track to apostasy. Look what has happened in the major denominations. For several decades the denominational meetings of United Methodists, Episcopalians, and many Presbyterian groups have been wholly dominated by discussions of how to be “relevant” in the modern world. This has led them to alter their theology, to adopt radical leftist politics, to adapt their morality, to vote in new ethical precepts, and to abandon virtually every doctrinal position they ever stood for. This accommodation to the world has advanced to the point where some of these groups no longer deserve to be called Christian. In recent years most of the oldest denominational groups have rejected the biblical standard regarding the ordination of women; they have accepted homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle; and they have even declared that Scripture does not give us a reliable historical record of the life of Christ. The seeds of that same apostasy are being sown today among evangelicals by those who are urging the church to adapt herself to the world.

In true Christianity, of course, truth is unchanging. The Word of God is settled forever in heaven (Ps. 119:89). Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). God Himself does not change (Mal. 3:6). How could we ever view truth as transient, pliable, or adaptable?

This unchanging view of truth is essential for true discernment. When the church loses its commitment to the inflexibility of truth, it loses its will to discern. It forfeits precise theology, precise morals, and precise conduct.

Right thinking and right living therefore demand careful discipline and an unyielding commitment to the truth. Discernment does not survive in an atmosphere of doctrinal confusion. It will not survive where relativism is tolerated. And it cannot survive if we compromise with the world.

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A FAILURE TO INTERPRET SCRIPTURE CAREFULLY

Another basic factor leading to the decline of discernment is a widespread failure to interpret Scripture properly. *Hermeneutics*—Bible interpretation—is an exacting science. Good preaching depends on careful hermeneutics. But too much modern preaching ignores the *meaning* of Scripture altogether. Pulpits are filled with preachers who are unwilling to do the hard work necessary to interpret Scripture properly. They pad their messages with stories, anecdotes, and clever outlines—all of which disguise the weakness or lack of biblical content.

Some have even gone so far as to suggest that a preoccupation with the meaning of Scripture is unhealthy. A book that rose to the top of the Christian best-sellers list a few years ago included a warning to readers that they should be wary of preachers whose emphasis is on *explaining* Scripture rather than *applying* it.

Certainly application is crucial, but careful interpretation must always come first. To attempt to apply the Word without understanding it is sheer folly. We must be diligent workmen, handling accurately the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

I cringe when I hear a novice wrench a verse out of context and impose on it a meaning that is totally unwarranted—or even contradictory to the intended sense of the text. Unfortunately, the standard has sunk so low today that even well-known Christian leaders can twist and contort Scripture beyond recognition, and yet no one seems to notice. One man who pastors a church of several thousand people recently appeared on nationwide television preaching a message on Acts 26:2, Paul's defense before Agrippa. Paul said, "I think myself happy, king Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee touching all the things whereof I am accused of the Jews" (kjv). This man pulled out the phrase "I think myself happy," and preached a sermon on the importance of positive thinking in the midst of adversity! But Paul was not telling Agrippa anything about positive thinking; he was saying, "I consider myself fortunate" (nasb) to be able to make a defense. That preacher had corrupted the intent of Paul's inspired words because he was using the verse out of context to teach an unbiblical doctrine.

Another preacher preached a sermon from Mark 2, which tells about some men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus and lowered him through the roof of the house so he could be healed. Mark 2:4 says, "They could not come nigh unto him for the press" (kjv). This man took that phrase as his text and waxed eloquent, sermonizing for more than a half hour about how the press—the news media—are still keeping people from Jesus even to this day! But that verse has nothing to do with the news media. "The press" in that verse refers to the dense crowd. The whole sermon was based on an utter corruption of the meaning of the text.

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Bible interpretation is a skill that requires rigorous training, understanding the meaning in the original languages, a working knowledge of grammar and logic, a grasp of historical settings, competence in theology, and a broad understanding of the whole of Scripture. Those who lack expertise in Greek and Hebrew must be all the more careful, checking commentaries, dictionaries, and other study helps to analyze the text as carefully as possible.

In this age of existentialism, many people have the impression that Bible interpretation is a subjective exercise. Perhaps you have been to a “Bible study” where the method of exploring a text was to go around the room and ask everyone, “What does this verse mean to *you*?” That is a sure path to confusion and a formula for reckless faith.

Even though the Bible itself commands us to be diligent and careful workmen, handling the Word with great care, there are some Christians who believe objective study is unnecessary. They suggest that we can just read the Bible and somehow Jesus will tell us what it means. Somehow the message just rises up from within, mystically. They will usually cite 1 John 2:27: “As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him.”

If that verse meant what some people suggest it means, it would eliminate the need for interpretation at all. It would also nullify the need for gifted pastors and teachers to equip the saints (Eph. 4:11–12). It would cancel any need for the gift of teaching (Rom. 12:6–7). It therefore cannot mean that instruction and diligent study are unnecessary as we approach the Word of God. So what was the apostle John saying? He was attacking an embryonic form of Gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that there is a secret knowledge that is not even contained in Scripture. If you weren’t initiated by some “enlightened” person into that secret knowledge, according to the Gnostics, you had not arrived spiritually. John was attacking that claim, saying that real spiritual enlightenment cannot be given by one person to another. He was *not* attacking study or learning. He was *not* advocating a subjective, mystical, existential approach to Bible interpretation.

Now and then you will hear someone say, “I don’t read commentaries and books *about* the Bible. I limit my study to the Bible itself.” That may sound very pious, but is it? Isn’t it actually presumptuous? Are the written legacies of godly men of no value to us? Can someone who ignores study aids understand the Bible just as well as someone who is familiar with the scholarship of other godly teachers and pastors?

One textbook on hermeneutics answers the question this way:

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Suppose we select a list of words from Isaiah and ask a man who claims he can bypass the godly learning of Christian scholarship if he can out of his own soul or prayer give their meaning or significance: Tyre, Zidon, Chittim, Sihor, Moab, Mahershalahashbas, Calno, Carchemish, Hamath, Aiath, Migron, Michmash, Geba, Anathoth, Laish, Nob, and Gallim. He will find the only light he can get on these words is from a commentary or a Bible dictionary.¹³

Good answer. It reveals the utter folly of thinking objective study is unnecessary. The person who is not a diligent student *cannot* be an accurate interpreter of God's Word. Scripture indicates that such a person is *not* approved by God and should be ashamed of himself (2 Tim. 2:15).

People do not usually accept false doctrine purposely. They err because of laziness, ineptness, carelessness, foolishness in handling the Scripture. In 2 Timothy 2:17–18, Paul mentions “Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some.”

The Greek verb translated “gone astray” is *astochēō*, which literally means, “to miss the mark.” It suggests that Hymenaeus and Philetus were aiming at the truth; they just missed it. They weren't trying to devise error, but being careless and unskilled in handling the truth, they turned to “worldly and empty chatter” (2 Tim. 2:16), which led them to conclude that the resurrection had already taken place. And their error, absurd as it was, had already upset the faith of others.

That is precisely why in verse fifteen Paul urged Timothy to be a diligent student of the Word of Truth.

What Paul was calling for is exactly the opposite of the shoot-from-the-hip ad-libbing that takes place in many contemporary pulpits. You can see this daily on religious television. It is one of the chief reasons some of the celebrity televangelists come up with so many novel doctrines. I'm convinced many of them improvise their theology as they speak.

That is a dangerous, deadly approach. It tends to corrupt God's Word. It perverts the truth, and it subverts people's ability to differentiate between sound doctrine and error. How can we be discerning if we don't even know how to interpret Scripture rightly? And without an accurate understanding of Scripture, we can't even establish principles for discernment.

¹³ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1970), pp. 17–18.

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THE NEGLECT OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Yet another reason for the decline of discernment and the rise of reckless faith is the almost universal failure of churches to follow Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18 on how to deal with sinning church members. Sadly, few Christians obey Christ in this crucial area of confronting sin in individual lives.

Jesus said,

If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer (Matt. 18:15–17).

If you see a brother in sin, go to him. Confront him. Try to lift him up, build him up, strengthen him. Urge him to repent. If he refuses to repent, he must ultimately be put out of the church. Paul said “not even to eat with such a one” (1 Cor. 5:11). This is not to suggest you should treat him like an enemy, but rather that you love him enough to seek his repentance by whatever means possible. Paul even instructed the Corinthians “to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (v. 5).

The church must hold up a high and holy standard. A very clear line must be drawn between the world and the church. Known and open sin cannot be tolerated. As soon as the church stops dealing with sin seriously, the world mingles with the church and the difference is obliterated. Christians are not supposed to be able to go on sinning and remain unchallenged by one another.

Why do you think the Lord struck Ananias and Sapphira dead in front of the whole congregation? It was so that the rest would be fearful of sinning (Acts 5:1–11; cf. 1 Tim. 5:20).

As we noted earlier, today's experts argue instead that the church should seek to make sinners comfortable so they will want to attend. I even heard one pastor advocate a no-confrontation policy. He said that when new people come to the church, if they are living in adultery, practicing homosexuality, or conducting themselves sinfully—even in a flagrant way—no one should confront them about those sins until they feel comfortable and accepted for who they are. He said he believes most people will just grow out of their sinful lifestyles as they become more involved in the church.

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But what are we to conclude when someone living in open sin can sit in church and feel comfortable? Is that church proclaiming what it's supposed to proclaim? I can't imagine that a practicing homosexual would have sat comfortably under Paul's teaching in Ephesus or Corinth.

The primary message of the church should *not* be, "We're a nice place; you'll like us." Instead, the message should be, "This is a holy place where sin is despised." Wasn't that, after all, the very point of the Ananias and Sapphira episode?

We can't lower the biblical standard. We can't accumulate sinning Christians or sinning non-Christians. We must purge and discipline and sift and purify. First Peter 4:17 says, "It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God." And Paul wrote, "Do you not judge those who are within the church?" (1 Cor. 5:12). "If we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged" (11:31).

The church that tolerates sin destroys its own holiness and subverts the discernment of its own members. How can the lines be drawn in people's thinking when a church refuses to regulate behavior? If the goal is to make everyone feel all right, tolerance and compromise must rule. Discernment and discrimination are then ruled out.

Jay Adams has written:

Lack of discernment and lack of church discipline walk side by side. Not only does the same mentality lead to both lacks, but by rejecting discipline one naturally downplays the very concerns that make him discerning. When churches reacted to the abuse of church discipline that was all too common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by virtually eliminating church discipline, the broken dike cleared the way for the liberal takeover of the church and allowed the ways of the world to flood in.¹⁴

Adams calls the collapse of church discipline the most obvious reason for the decline of discernment in the church. As he points out, "Discipline, by its very nature, requires discernment."¹⁵

But in an undiscerning church, discipline is neglected. And where discipline is neglected, discernment declines further and further.

¹⁴ Adams, 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

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A LACK OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

One more factor in the abysmal lack of discernment today is a growing deterioration of the overall level of spiritual maturity in today's church. As knowledge of God's truth ebbs, people follow more popular views, seeking feelings and experiences. They are hungry for miracles, healings, and spectacular wonders. They grope for easy and instant solutions to the routine trials of life. They turn quickly from the plain truth of God's Word to embrace doctrines fit only for the credulous and naive. They chase personal comfort and success. Christianity today may be shallower than at any time in history.

A survey released by the Barna Research Group in February of 1994 revealed that half of all people who described themselves as "born-again" had no clue what John 3:16 refers to. Large percentages of professing Christians were also at a loss to explain terms such as "The Great Commission," or "the Gospel." Many defined "Gospel" simply as "a style of music."¹⁶

Spiritual ignorance and biblical illiteracy are commonplace. That kind of spiritual shallowness is a direct result of shallow teaching. Solid preaching with deep substance and sound doctrine is essential for Christians to grow. But churches today often teach only the barest basics—and sometimes less than that.

Churches are therefore filled with baby Christians—people who are spiritual infants. That is a fitting description, because the characteristic that is most descriptive of an infant is selfishness. Babies are completely self-centered. They scream if they don't get what they want when they want it. They are aware of only their own needs and desires. They never say thanks for anything. They can't help others; they can't *give* anything. They can only receive. And certainly there is nothing wrong with that when it occurs in the natural stage of infancy. But to see a child whose development is arrested so he never gets beyond the stage of helpless selfishness—that is a tragedy.

And that is exactly the spiritual state of multitudes in the church today. They are utterly preoccupied with self. They want their own problems solved and their own comfort elevated. Their spiritual development is arrested, and they remain in a perpetual state of selfish helplessness. It is evidence of a tragic abnormality.

Arrested infancy means people do not discern. Just as a baby crawls along the floor, putting anything it finds in its mouth, spiritual babies don't know what is good for them

¹⁶ "What Happens When Christians Use Bad Language" (21 February 1994 news release from the Barna Research Group, Ltd.)

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and what isn't. Immaturity and lack of discernment go together; they are virtually the same thing.

The tendency to stall in a state of immaturity also existed in New Testament times. Paul repeatedly appealed to Christians to grow up spiritually. In Ephesians 4:14–15, he wrote, “We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to *grow up* in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (emphasis added).

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How do we grow spiritually? By “speaking the truth in love” to one another. We grow under the truth. It is the same truth by which we are sanctified, conformed to the image of Christ, made to be mature spiritually (John 17:17, 19). As we absorb the truth of God’s Word, we grow up and are built up. We might say accurately that the process of spiritual growth *is* a process of training for discernment.

Hebrews 5:12–6:1 underscores all this:

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity.

The writer of Hebrews told his readers, “You’re babies. You’ve been around long enough to be teachers, but instead I have to feed you milk. I have to keep giving you elementary things. You can’t take solid food. You’re not accustomed to the rich things of the Word—and that is tragic.”

Notice in verse fourteen he states that discernment and maturity go hand in hand: “solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” Knowing and understanding the Word of righteousness—taking in solid food—trains your senses to discern good and evil.

The word “senses” is not a reference to the feelings, emotions, or other subjective sensory mechanisms. The writer of this epistle is explicitly encouraging his readers to exercise their *minds*. Those who “because of practice have their senses trained to discern” are the wise, the understanding, people who thrive on the solid food of the Word of God. As we have seen from the beginning, discernment results from a carefully disciplined mind.

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Discernment is not a matter of feelings, nor is it a mystical gift. Notice from the wisdom literature of the Old Testament how closely discernment is linked with a seasoned, developed, biblically informed mind.

- Psalm 119:66: “Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Thy commandments.”
- Proverbs 2:2–5: “Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord, and discover the knowledge of God.”
- Proverbs 10:13: “On the lips of the discerning, wisdom is found.”
- Proverbs 16:21: “The wise in heart will be called discerning.”

The path to discernment is the way of spiritual maturity. And the only means to spiritual maturity is mastery of the Word of God.

Most people are discerning about things that are important to them. People who regard a healthy diet as crucial watch carefully what they eat. They read the fine print on the package to see how many grams of fat it has and what percentages of the daily required nutrients are offered. People who work with pesticides or dangerous chemicals must be very discerning. They study the procedures and the precautions very carefully to avoid any potentially lethal exposure. People who make investments in the stock market usually practice discernment. They study the cryptic newspaper listings on the stock market and watch the ticker tape. Lawyers are very discerning with contracts. They have to figure out the legal jargon and make sure they understand what they are signing. People who undergo delicate surgery are usually very discerning. They try to find the doctor with the finest skills—or at least verify that he or she has plenty of experience in whatever procedure is to be done. I know many people who are very discerning sports enthusiasts. They watch a football game and can assess any offense, any defense, any play. They often feel they are *more* discerning than whoever is calling the actual plays. They study statistics and averages and take it all very seriously.

Do you realize those are essentially the same skills that are required in spiritual discernment? Careful thought, keen interest, thorough analysis, close observation— together with alertness, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, and above all, a love of truth. All of us have those skills to some degree, and we use them in whatever field of endeavor is important to us.

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Yet what could be *more* important than spiritual discernment?

There is no valid explanation for why contemporary Christians are so *undiscerning*—but it reveals a spiritual apathy that is deadly evil.

Can the church regain her ability to be discerning? Only by growing up spiritually. That means confronting the spirit of a relativistic age and diligently applying ourselves to the unfailing Word of God. We cannot gain discernment overnight, or through a mystical experience. Understanding the problem is not the answer. Discernment will come only as we train our minds to be understanding in the truth of God's Word and learn to apply that truth skillfully to our lives. In the following chapter we will look at the practical means of accomplishing that goal.¹⁷

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¹⁷ MacArthur, J. (1994). *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (34–66). Crossway Books.