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# PEOPLE OF TRUTH IN AN AGE OF DECEPTION

1 & 2 Timothy & Titus

By

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Special New Year's Message

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The late Professor Allan Bloom began his best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind* ([Simon and Schuster], 1987, pp. 25-26), by stating,

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question  $2 + 2 = 4$ . These are things you don't think about.... The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating.... The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.

The view that there is no absolute truth pervades our society. A recent Gallup poll conducted for Americans United for Life found nearly 70 percent agree with the statement: "There are few moral absolutes; what is right or wrong usually varies from situation to situation." Only 27 percent disagreed. And while 50 percent were troubled about the influence of religious fundamentalism, only 36 percent expressed concern about secular humanism's influence (cited in *Leadership* [Fall, 1992], p. 133).

If I could encourage you to read only two books besides the Bible in the coming New Year, they would be John MacArthur's *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Crossway Books) and David Wells' *No Place for Truth* (Eerdmans). The second book is a bit more difficult be-

cause it's written from a more scholarly point of view. Both books show that we live in an age of relativity, where the notion of absolute truth has gone the way of the dinosaur and where the evangelical church is rapidly becoming like the world in diminishing the central role of truth.

MacArthur develops a parallel between the current scene and the "Downgrade" controversy of Spurgeon's final years, about 100 years ago. Wells comes at the subject from a broader historical and sociological perspective. But both men show that the church today has minimized biblical truth in favor of whatever works to draw people in. To do this, the church has adopted a marketing approach, where you give the customer what he wants and tiptoe around difficult issues such as sin, hell, judgment, and other politically incorrect topics. The measure of success in the local church has become "is the church growing?" rather than "is the church faithful to the truth?"

The goal, of course, is a good one: To bring people to know Christ and to become a part of His church. But both MacArthur and Wells show that the theologically liberal modernists of 100 years ago had exactly the same goal. The modernists didn't set out to deny the faith. They were afraid that if they didn't make the gospel message "relevant" to their culture, they would lose people. Even so, the church growth movement today is seeking to make the faith relevant to baby boomers and others who have been turned off. To do this, they use modern marketing and management strategies and offer short, uplifting, psychologized sermons that play down truth or doctrine, with the goal of making people feel good. But the end result is the same: By minimizing biblical truth, you end up selling out the heart of the faith.

Today I'd like to explore the proposition that

Since God is the author of truth,  
His people must be people of truth.

I'm going to limit myself to Paul's final three letters, called the "pastoral epistles," 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy (in chronological order). The concept of God being the author of truth and His people being people of truth runs throughout the Bible, of course. But it is a central theme in these letters which Paul wrote to

his two faithful understudies who were seeking to establish the church in pagan cultures. False teachers were threatening the fledgling churches from within. Paul puts a decided emphasis on teaching sound doctrine and refuting false doctrine. In light of where our American culture and the American church are at, there is nothing more important for us to understand and follow in the New Year and in the rest of this decade. To swim upstream against our relativistic culture, we must understand that ...

1. God is the author of truth.

Note Titus 1:1-3. God is the God of truth. By His very nature, He cannot lie. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). When we talk about the God of truth, we are *not* talking about the *word* "god" or the *idea* "god," but about "the God who is there," to use Francis Schaeffer's term. He is the God who has always existed and who created everything else. All truth stems from Him. Truth is thus related to who God is as an objective, living Being, and to the universe He has created. In other words, truth is not a subjective experience inside a person's head. Truth is objective and absolute because it stems from God who is objectively existent and absolutely true. There are two important facts concerning God's truth:

A. God's truth has been revealed to the human race.

It has been manifested in His word (Titus 1:3), both the living Word (Jesus) and the written Word.

(1) God's truth centers in the person of God's Son. The word of the gospel which Paul preached was revealed at the proper time in the person of Jesus Christ. In 1 Timothy 2:6 Paul refers to the man Christ Jesus, "who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time" (same Greek phrase). In 2 Timothy 1:12, Paul significantly affirms not that he knew *what* he believed (although he did), but rather that he knew *whom* he believed. His faith was in a person, a man, born in time of a woman, who gave Himself at a point in history as the ransom for our sins.

It is important in our day that we affirm and proclaim that God's truth centers in the historical person of God's Son, Jesus of Nazareth, whose life and person are revealed to us in the Gospel records. He is not a mythical figure. He was born, lived, died, was

raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven as is recorded in those accounts.

I emphasize this because the words “Jesus” and “Christ” have become meaningless, empty terms in our modern world. Several of the cults and some of the New Agers claim to be followers of Jesus or to believe in “the Christ,” but it is not the Jesus Christ of the Bible and of history they believe in, but a Jesus of their own imagination. And quite often evangelicals invite people to receive Jesus as their Savior when those people know almost nothing of who He is. But our faith does not rest on “Jesus as you conceive Him to be,” but rather on the Jesus who lived in history, revealed in God’s Word.

(2) God’s truth is contained in the words of Scripture. God has revealed Himself verbally or propositionally in understandable language, recorded by His prophets and apostles in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. In these pastoral epistles, Paul puts an emphasis on the verbal nature of God’s revelation (see 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:15; 3:15-16; 4:2-4; Titus 1:3; 1:9).

This is important to affirm because doctrine or theology is being treated as unimportant in our day. I find it interesting that I preached the basic content of this sermon on New Year’s Day, 1984. At that time, my main concern was those who called themselves evangelicals but who denied the absolute veracity of Scripture. While those false teachers are still around, a decade later the main way Satan is attacking truth is by elevating “what works” over what is true.

David Wells observes (pp. 6, 13) that while formerly a pastor’s main task was to be a truth broker, who explained and proclaimed God’s truth to His people, today it has shifted so that pastors have become managers of the small enterprise called the church and therapists who help people feel good about themselves.

The Apostle Paul always saw proper theology as the foundation for proper living. The first sections of Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians, as well as his emphasis in the Pastoral epistles on “sound doctrine” and teaching (1 Tim. 1:10; 4:6; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1, 2, 7) show that biblical faith is concerned with truth as contained in the words of Scripture.

The great theologians, Calvin, Luther, and Edwards, were all pastors; the great pastors, Matthew Henry, Spurgeon, and Lloyd-Jones were all theologians. But in our day, with a few exceptions, the most well-known pastors are theologically shallow. In fact, they make fun of pastors who emphasize theology as being out of touch with and unable to relate to the modern world.

John MacArthur (p. 192) tells of a friend of his who wanted to learn how the so-called “user-friendly” churches were integrating doctrine into their ministries. He sent for a tape catalog, asking for tapes that focused on biblical doctrine. He discovered that by a ratio of more than 30 to 1, the sermons preached in that church dealt with contemporary topics, psychological issues, personal relationships, motivational themes, etc. Messages dealing with doctrine or even sermons based on biblical texts were rare. Most of the messages would have been immediately transferrable to any context, such as a sales convention, a school assembly, or a businessmen’s luncheon. If they used Scripture, it was only for illustrative purposes. Doctrine is simply a non-issue with these growing churches that are held up as models for other pastors to follow.

(1) God’s truth centers in the person of His Son; and, (2) is contained in the words of Scripture.

(3) God’s truth is preserved and upheld by the church. Note 1 Timothy 3:15: the church is “the pillar and support of the truth.” We need to remember that when Paul wrote Romans and his other great theological treatises, he wasn’t writing primarily for seminary professors, so that they would have some good material for their graduate seminars. He wrote these things under the inspiration of God’s Spirit for common, everyday people in the churches--people with the same kind of struggles and problems you and I face. Knowing these great truths is the foundation we need to live properly in this fallen world. To say it another way, sound theology is always the basis for sound living.

And it is the church that is to preserve, uphold, and defend these great truths of the Bible. By minimizing biblical truth and putting the emphasis on subjective experience, we’re not proclaiming to our lost culture what it needs to hear from God and, as Wells states, we’re in danger of no longer being historic Protestants (p. 102).

This hit me with force several years ago when I was studying the so-called Christian "recovery" movement. I was reading material from a program at the church of probably the most well-known radio pastor in America. The thrust of the material was not on trusting in Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture--the cross of Christ was not mentioned, let alone central--but rather on trusting in the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

There were Bible verses tacked on to the Steps to make them look Christian. There were statements like, "The 12 Steps work. Trust in the Steps. Work the Steps." While they used the name "Jesus" for the "Higher Power," it became clear to me that "Jesus" (however you conceive Him to be!) wasn't the critical factor; the 12 Steps were the thing. You could make Jesus or Buddha or some statue on your shelf your Higher Power. The name "Jesus" makes the program sound Christian. But the critical factor isn't the Jesus of the Bible. It's the 12 Steps.

What scares me is that these kinds of programs are in most of the large evangelical churches of our day, promoted as being Christian, when in fact they are simply the world's methods with a veneer of Christianity. The church in America has abandoned God's truth in favor of the world's pop-psychology! But we're the ones who are supposed to uphold God's truth in the face of secularism and false religions.

A. God's truth has been revealed to the human race. (1) It centers on the person of God's Son; (2) is contained in the words of Scripture; and, (3) is preserved and upheld by the church.

B. God's truth is knowable and must be believed.

(1) God's truth is knowable. By that I mean that God has communicated with us in intelligible language we can comprehend. You don't need to be initiated into the inner circle to grasp some hidden meaning. This is not to say that there are not deep and difficult doctrines in the Bible. Nor is it to say that the natural man can comprehend the things of the Spirit.

But notice the emphasis on the knowledge of the truth in these epistles (see 1 Tim. 2:4; 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1). The fact that we can know the truth points also to the fact that there is a body of unchanging, absolute truth that is knowable. While we

need to avoid the spiritual pride of insisting that our view on non-central doctrines is the only right view, we can have the quiet assurance of knowing that we know God's truth on the major issues that matter, not just about God, but also about godliness (Titus 1:1). And, we can teach truth as truth, not as up for grabs, to our children and to people who are groping for answers about life and godliness.

(2) God's truth must be believed. (Note 1 Tim. 2:7; 4:3, 6; 2 Tim. 1:12; Titus 1:1). Knowing and believing the truth go together. Knowing the truth is not just a mental thing. You must also commit yourself to the truth by faith. This isn't a blind leap. Faith is always based on the knowledge of certain content. You can't honestly believe in Jesus if you know nothing about Him. But there comes a point at which you have enough information and yet there are still unresolved issues. At that point, you will not know more until you believe.

For example, let's say you have come to know through reading the Bible that Jesus Christ is uniquely the Son of God; you have read of His miracles and His teaching; you realize that there is solid evidence that He was raised bodily from the dead; and you know that you have sinned and that Jesus died to pay the penalty you deserve to pay. At that point, you need to make a faith commitment to follow Jesus Christ or you will not gain further knowledge. You will have unanswered questions about difficult issues all your life. The point of God's revealing His truth to us is not to fill our heads, but to change our lives. And that change comes about when we repent of our sins and trust in Christ as Savior.

It's kind of like marriage. You can read books and interview married people and learn a lot about marriage. You can get to know a potential marriage partner very well. But if you really want to learn about marriage, at some point you have to make a commitment (based on reasonable knowledge!). That commitment changes your life forever. You go on growing in your knowledge of that person.

Christianity, then, is not just a set of doctrines, although it is not void of doctrines. It is a personal knowledge of the living God as He has revealed Himself in His Son and in His written Word. We enter that relationship of knowing both God and His truth

through faith in the truth He has revealed as it relates to His Son. The bottom line is:

2. God's people must be people of truth.

We must *think* in line with biblical truth, *speak* God's truth, and *live* in obedience to it. Paul begins First Timothy by warning Timothy of those who misuse Scripture and go astray (1 Tim. 1:6-11). Throughout these letters are warnings of those who have turned away from God's truth (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 6:3-5, 20-21; 2 Tim. 2:16-18, 23-26; 3:1-8, 13; 4:3-4, 15; Titus 1:9-16; 3:10-11). God's truth is addressed to the mind, but it ought to affect speech and behavior, so that God's people live or "adorn" the doctrine of God in every respect (Titus 3:10).

The danger we face today, if Wells and MacArthur are right (and I'm convinced they are) is that we as evangelicals have set aside truth as the center and replaced it with personal experience. Instead of biblical conviction, we elevate tolerance. We are being swept downstream with our culture, so that, as Wells states, "evangelicalism has become simply one more expression of the self movement" (p. 140). He cites James Orr, who wrote in 1897, that the New Testament "comes to men with definite, positive teaching; it claims to be the truth; it bases religion on knowledge.... A religion based on mere feeling is the vaguest, most unreliable, most unstable of all things. A strong, stable, religious life can be built on no other ground than that of intelligent conviction" (Wells, p. 281). Wells concludes, "Intelligent conviction requires for its underpinning and, indeed, its explanation, a truth that is objectively true. Unless truth is objective, it cannot be declared to others, cannot be taught to others, cannot be required of others" (p. 282).

### Conclusion

If you were here and recall it, my first message as pastor here was from 2 Timothy 4:1-5, "My Major Task and Yours." I developed the thesis that my major task is to preach God's truth, even when it reproves, rebukes and exhorts; and that your major task is to hear the Word even when it's difficult ("endure sound doctrine"), with a view to obeying it. My major danger is that out of a desire to be popular, I will soften God's truth; your major danger is

that out of a desire to feel good, you will go find someone who tells you what you want to hear rather than what you need to hear.

My reason for wanting each of you to read MacArthur and Wells this year (in addition to reading your Bible!) is so you would understand how and why I operate as I do! You will understand why I preach as I do and why I don't follow a lot of the current popular methods in vogue in evangelical circles. You'll understand why I don't hesitate to challenge a lot that is being called Christian in our day, but really is worldly at its core. I am driven by a passion for knowing and proclaiming God's truth. That truth cuts against not only the grain of our culture, but also of much modern evangelicalism. We live in an age of deception. If we want to avoid being swept downstream, if we want to stand as the pillar and support of God's truth, we must become people of the truth. Without it, our Christianity will crumble under the pressures of the modern world. I ask you to commit yourself afresh in the New Year to become a person of truth in this age of deception.

### Discussion Questions

1. I've often heard, "What we need is life, not doctrine!" What's wrong with that statement?
2. How can we emphasize truth and yet avoid arrogant dogmatism? Should dogmatism be a dirty word?
3. How can we know when to be tolerant and when to hold firmly to biblical convictions?
4. Biblically, does love take precedence over truth or truth over love?

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