

Heresy & Hyper-doxo

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This morning, I am talking about what is my biggest passion as a teacher and pastor: To see you, the church equipped to properly and effectively study and apply God's Word.

GOOFINESS

Growing up in the Pentecostal movement, I have seen the Bible used in some incredibly sloppy and bizarre ways. In one particular group I worked with, there were several well-meaning but poorly trained teachers and leaders who took passages so far out of context that it made my head spin.

It was very disconcerting to see the people I was supposed to trust saying things that actually contradicted Scripture. Most of it was rather minor goofiness, but I have also heard things that are flat out, no-longer-Christians, heresy. That experience left me with two life-changing realizations:

- 1) In the end, I would be responsible to God for what I believed – I could not blame anyone else.
- 2) Therefore, I needed to learn how to study the Bible for myself.

So I went to Bible College, where I studied theology, hermeneutic, exegesis, Biblical history, and learned Greek and Hebrew. Our professors hounded this passage into us:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. *2 Timothy 2:15 NIV*

This became our mantra. To this day, I still hear my professors' voices whenever I am tempted to misquote Scripture.

ARROGANCE

But while I was there I saw an entirely different problem: Students who really knew how to "correctly handle" the Bible and were very orthodox theologically, but were some of the most arrogant and self-righteous people I had met.

- Sad to say, most of them were in the Greek program with me.
- I am also sorry to say that I was one of them.

Whenever I visited a church, I'd listen to the sermon waiting to pounce on some hermeneutical mistake. I remember one particular occasion, my buddy and I were laughing at some pastor's exegetical *faux pas*. Afterward, the Holy Spirit convicted us about our attitude.

- That was the first time I saw just how obnoxious my arrogance must have been to God, and I started to deal with it.

And then I graduated and started to work in a church, and I was a little surprised to find out that no one really cared about the nuances of the Greek adverbial participle.

TWO EXTREMES

In the past nine years of being a pastor, I have these two extremes too often: Heresy and hyper-doxo. Hyper-doxo is a term of my own coining. It's kind of like orthodoxy, but it's really hyper. Hyper is a Greek prefix meaning "an excess of measure." But you probably don't care about that.

You probably know the type: They can run circles around you quoting the Bible or discussing some nuanced point of theology, but something just ain't right.

- Initially, they might impress or intimidate you, but the more you get to know them, the less of Jesus you see in them.

And because of seeing these two extremes, I have developed a passion to see believer avoid both heresy and hyper-doxo, because both are lethal to the church.

- In order to avoid these, we must not be Biblically illiterate or Biblically arrogant.

TRUTH AND LIES

The term "heresy" is not particularly popular today. It brings to mind the Spanish Inquisition or thought police. But it simply means beliefs that clearly contradict the Bible.

- And if people believe a dangerous lie, it's not loving to tell them that it's simply an alternate truth.

The book of 2 Peter was written to refute one of the earlier heretical teachings, which said that Jesus was not going to return to earth.

- Early Christians thought He would come back in their life time, and His delay caused a crisis of faith.

The way Peter addressed these false teachers instructs in how to avoid not only heresy, but hyper-doxo as well.

As you read 2 Peter, it becomes clear that this false teaching about Jesus' return wasn't some minor point of end time trivia.

- Because they lost sight of the returning righteous judge, they advocated living godless lives, especially sexual immorality.

This is an important point: Wrong thinking leads to wrong behavior. For this reason, Peter makes it very clear that these doctrinal issues are life and death stuff, not just matter of opinion. We are playing for keeps here:

But if anyone does not have [these things], he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall... *2 Peter 1:9-10 NIV*

By saying "if you do these things, you will never fall," he is also saying that if you don't do these things you will fall.

So here is the real warning of 2 Peter, and this message: We must watch ourselves to ensure that we do not adopt the wrong thinking and corrupt actions that surround us. We are not talking about disagreements about minor issues, matters that Christians can disagree on. This is the core stuff of the Gospel:

1. Was Jesus the Son of God and the only way to the Father, or just a good man?

2. Did His death and resurrection pay the penalty for our sin, or was he just a peasant martyr?
3. Have you submitted to Him as your Lord, as well as savior?

You get these wrong and you no longer have Christianity. You might have a cult that reads the same book that we do, but it will not be Christianity.

Don't think this is theoretical - I've watched people turn from truth and godliness to error and perversion, people who used to be part of this church. Peter shows us how to avoid this fate:

And we have the word of the prophets [which was the Bible Peter knew] made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. *2 Peter 1:19-21 NIV*

Peter draws us back to the Bible. It is our guide and source, inspired by the Holy Spirit. To avoid false teaching, we each, individually, need to know and understand God's word.

NO EXCUSES

Because here's the thing: Come judgment day, Mormons can't say "But Joseph Smith said..." and Jehovah's Witnesses won't be able to say "But I was taught..." And you won't be able to say, "But Bruce said..., but Josh said..." In the final analysis, each one of you is accountable to God for what you believe.

- Every believer is responsible for what they believe.
- We each have a Bible, and we are responsible to read and understand it.

Our role as pastors is not to hand feed you truth, but to train you up to be able to handle God's word. Listen to what Paul says about the pastor's role:

It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles...and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. *Ephesians 4:11-14 NIV*

The pastor's job is simply to equip, which is what we are trying to do.

HYPER-DOXY

So what about avoiding hyper-doxy? This is where 2 Peter gets really interesting to me. Earlier I read that we must have "these things" But what are "these thing"? Certain doctrines, a creed to know?

...make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind... *2 Peter 1:5-9 NIV*

Christian doctrine is expressed in terms of Christian behavior.

- Something believed but not lived isn't truly believed.

And that really defines what hyper-doxy is: a fanatical attention to Christian doctrine (especially the obscure, minor ones), without attention to love, humility, and joy. The godly life is a matter of balance. I love how Paul put it:

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. *1 Timothy 4:16 NIV*

WHAT NOW?

I want to leave you with a couple of things that I think might help you "watch your life and doctrine."

1. Treat Sunday's sermons as a beginning, not an end.

After Bruce has preached about a parable, go back and read it, in context. Study it for yourself. Do you agree with what was taught? As I said, you are responsible for what you believe.

2. Own a study Bible.

My personal favorite is the NIV Study Bible. It has notes at the beginning of each book to help you understand the context.

3. Read your Bible!

You have heard this a thousand times, but there is simply no substitution for reading the thing. Like all of you, I'm busy and I have a hard time reading my Bible as well.

I have just figured out a little trick that has really helped, but I am embarrassed to tell you about it. It has to do with keeping a copy in a oft visited place.

4. Ask the Holy Spirit help you move the Bible from your head to your hands.

See to it that you do not accumulate head knowledge, but that you are cooperating with the Spirit to change. The best gauge of change is the fruit of the Spirit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. *Galatians 5:22-23 NIV*

And our success as pastors is gauged by the extent that you are growing in orthodoxy and orthopraxy - right doctrine and right living.