

DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

AUGUST 2024 | 2 TIMOTHY 3:10-17

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17, ESV

DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN

We as a society are suffering from the frustration of a gospel-starved people trying to manage a societal order that demands a gospel-inspired wisdom. We are confused and fearful, and fearful people are vulnerable to spurious ideologies that offer quick or easy relief. The founders of the democratic republic of the United States knew that the governmental structures they were installing required a character that only comes from gospel power. To paraphrase John Adams: It is impossible to have a government armed with enough power to bridle the passions of the human heart unbridled by the yoke of Jesus Christ.

The cosmic war has been largely ignored by the body of Christ, and Hell has succeeded in reducing the church's message to a mutually acceptable religious claim that rejects the exclusivity of Jesus as the last word on truth. It promotes a morality of self-improvement by self-effort for the sake of self-esteem. In our

effort to get along, we have removed the truths that make Christianity both offensive and powerful.

Sociologist Chris Smith defined American Christianity as "moralistic therapeutic deism." I believe that is generally accurate. It is "moralistic" in that we have focused on rules of behavior (being better people, lessons on improvement), and we have used the Bible as the foundation for such a scheme. Moralism has no element of personal intimacy. The issue is the lesson, not the teacher. It is the regulation, not the relationship. The goal is to produce nice people who can put on a good face. The Bible is reduced to stories of moral successes and failures. Sermons feature principles to practice and propositions to believe. The result is a bland religion that is neither attractive nor effective. In recent years, we have lamented the surveys that reveal that more people are willing to admit that they have no affiliation with church. They are called the

"nones." When asked why, they often say that religion is not important to their big decisions and that it is boring. Isaiah had an oracle to Israel that said they had rejected the rest and mercy God provided and the result was that the word of God for them would be "line on line, precept on precept, a little here, a little there." In other words, boring and bland (see *Isaiah 28:9-13*). He went on to predict that when in desperation they cried out to Him for mercy, they would be conscious of the teacher and hear Him speaking to them and guiding them (see *Isaiah 30:18-22*). God has never wanted to have a nice, behaving people living by principles and propositions. He wants fellowship and partnership. Intimacy with us like the intimacy in the Godhead.

It is "therapeutic" in the sense that the diagnosis of the human dilemma is the distortion of the psyche caused by forces of nature and circumstance. The solution presented is the kind of therapy that tries to manage the effects of trauma and dysfunction. When that alone is the cure, it leaves out the cross. Just like moralism has no intimacy, this therapeutic aspect has no cross. The Bible reveals that mankind's sickness is so severe that only death can cure it. It requires a start over, a resurrection. Only the gospel offers that solution. Talk shows and pop psychology offer all kinds of novel ways to manage and suppress the pain and its source, but only the proclamation of the gospel offers a new life that has come through the cross with Jesus and is now energizing the new creation by His Spirit.

It is "deism" in the sense that God is common to all sincere religions, but global and personal. There is a belief in the existence of a god that relates to creation in some way or another. Maybe he created all things, but he left it to run on its own and he lives outside our messy

world. He can be approached by anyone who chooses to placate him by requesting something from him. Different religions call him by different names, and he answers to them all. Like moralism that has no intimacy, and therapy that has no cross, deism has no mediator. The unique God of the gospel is holy and cannot be approached by sinful mankind without a Mediator. The intensity of perfect love would destroy the person trying to approach God without a sacrifice, and the only sacrifice that allows entry into the heavenly Holy of Holies is the Lamb of God, proclaimed by the gospel as Jesus, the Son of God.

Paul, in his last letter written to Timothy, offers a radically different alternative to moralistic therapeutic deism. He addresses how to live distinctively as Christians in a world spinning under the weight of unbridled, sinful passions. It was approximately 68 AD when he penned the letter, and he was keenly aware of the tense situation squeezing the Christian church. The Jews, who had rejected Jesus as Messiah, were increasing their persecution towards Christians. Rome was in turmoil under mentally unstable Caesars and engaging in a purge of Christians. Times were difficult. Wicked men were ruling in the religious arena and in the civil sphere. Paul explicitly tells Timothy how to live in such times:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but

denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:1-17, ESV

There are four truths in the text that help define what is distinctive about New Testament Christianity.

One: Gospel living creates a crisis. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but by His very being and work, He is the standard of judgment. Those who are confronted with Him must choose to believe in Him or not. People don't like to be put on the spot. We all like to be in charge. Jesus creates a crisis of choice. This inevitably causes persecution. Paul stresses that he has been persecuted everywhere he has gone with the gospel. He says that ALL who embrace the gospel will suffer persecution. A church that is not being persecuted by secular ideology is a church with no distinctives from the culture. The brand of Christianity that is popular today has removed the uncomfortable parts of the message and promoted a kind of religion that any self-respecting moralist would approve. Sermons that feature principles of natural order can be appreciated by anyone of any religion. Who is going to protest against the sowing and reaping principle? Whole churches have been built by promising people that if they will give, they will receive. That works for secular atheists as well as Christians. It is not distinctively Christian. Positive thinking and speaking is another principle that is good and taught in the Bible, but it is not uniquely Christian. Boundaries about time, money, sex, and relationships should be established, but these are truths that come from the natural order. I often hear churches wanting to find a pastor who preaches the Bible. There are many. Not nearly as many preach the gospel. The principles of natural order that make life on this earth work are good and necessary, but the gospel is beyond these and is both offensive and explosive.

Two: It is important that you know your teacher. Paul reminds Timothy that he and his

companions are the ones who taught him how to interpret scripture and to apply the radical gospel to daily living. Timothy didn't get this from a stranger on TV or a podcast. The truth that had birthed and matured Timothy came through men who were knowable and relatable. Their lives were testimony that their doctrine was genuine.

Three: It is time to focus on the certainties of the truth. What have you believed that you hold firmly in every situation? It is not time to dally around with novel interpretations and spectacular messages.

Four: The scriptures must be read rightly. Timothy had been acquainted with the scriptures from his childhood, but Jesus had come to fulfill the hopes in the Old Testament scriptures. Timothy now must learn to interpret them as they relate to the salvation Jesus came to bring. Everything in scripture before His appearance was right, but it was partial. He came to fulfill and explain (see *Hebrews 1:1-4*). It is not enough to be a Bible teacher. The distinctively Christian teacher always takes the text to Jesus for its final interpretation. The Christian preacher preaches Jesus from every text.

The apostle John wrote his account of Jesus from the point of view that Jesus came to bring a new kind of life to the world. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4, ESV). The word John used for life is a word that means a different kind of life from the natural life in animals and humans. It is called "eternal life" because it has eternal qualities. It is the life that Jesus lived on earth. The entire gospel of John is taken up showing how the Jews of the day couldn't grasp the difference in the two kinds of life. They were all about the material, physical, temporal, sensual. Jesus was exhibiting a new world kind of life. The last sign-miracle that John records is the raising of Lazarus

in John 11. Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, lived in Bethany. Lazarus became ill and the sisters sent word to Jesus who was a day's travel away. When Jesus heard, He intentionally waited two more days to go to Lazarus. When He finally did come, Martha met Him outside the village showing her disappointment that Jesus didn't come when requested. "Your brother will rise again," He told her. She agreed that in the end of time when God concluded all things Lazarus would rise, but she wanted her brother alive now. Jesus made an astounding announcement to her: "I am the resurrection and the life." The future had invaded the present, and what they had hoped for was standing in front of her. Crisis! She could believe or not. The raising of Lazarus was a sign pointing to the resurrection of Jesus that was going to happen soon. His message to Martha is the same to us: We can embrace the life of the resurrected One and actually share that life with Him now while we move toward the final restoration of all things. We are living the future life in the present, waiting for the ultimate new body.

Those who know of this secret are not frightened by the times. They aren't anxious to be snatched away for survival. They know that they have the light of life in them and it always displaces the darkness of death. They are eager to pick up the spoils of the victory that Jesus has accomplished through His death and resurrection. They read the scriptures to see and touch Him. They already have eternal life and don't need to die physically to get it. They are Christians, and their very existence is distinctive.

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