

2 Timothy 2:14-17a

2Tim. 2:14 Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. 16 Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, 17 and their talk will spread like gangrene.

WRANGLE

Don't wrangle over words. We don't use that word, "wrangle" very much, but it's a good word.

And we do it a lot.

My dictionary defines wrangle in two ways. First, it refers to an angry dispute. And second it means to herd or round up.

In the Presbyterian Church we sometimes use both meanings of that word at once. We round people up in order to have an angry dispute over words. We call it Presbytery or General Assembly or sometimes even a congregational meeting!

The phrase "wrangle over words" is a translation of one Greek word. A dynamic translation of that word might be "to argue about things that are of little importance or to have a war of words."

And you thought the Bible isn't relevant to life today. We are still having a war of words all these years later. Why? Why can't we all just get along, especially in the church?

Disagreement over what the Bible says is understandable and inevitable. We all have different experiences and different ways of looking at the world. And so we interpret the Bible differently because we bring those various assumptions to our reading of the Bible.

John Calvin said that we should look at the world through the spectacles of Scripture. But, all of us read Scripture through the lens of our own experience.

We emphasize certain portions of the Bible and neglect others. And we all do that.

That's why we have different Christian denominations. We read Scripture through the lens of a particular tradition and a particular way of understanding the Bible. And quite often that leads us to different conclusions and even conflict over the meaning of words.

That's why liberal Christians can find Scripture passages to bolster their viewpoint and that's why conservative Christians can find Scripture to bolster their viewpoint. I have

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that the same contentious political arguments that plague our nation inevitably find their way into our church discussions as well.

FUNDAMENTAL FAITH

Now some of you might want to say,
“That’s not right. The church is not about politics. The church is about the kingdom of God. The church is about the fact that God was in Christ. The church is about the hope of the resurrection.”

And I would say,
“Amen, brothers and sisters. You are right.”

Many of the discussions that we have in the church do us no good at all. Compared to the incarnation and the resurrection, many of the things that occupy our attention are trivial.

Earlier in this same letter Paul made this very point. He said, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendent of David—that is my gospel ...” (2 Timothy 2:8)

In other words the core of Paul’s message focused on the resurrection and the incarnation. That was his gospel. Christmas and Easter are the two most important celebrations of the Christian year. Why?

They are about the incarnation and the resurrection. They are at the heart of the gospel.

When we have harsh disagreements in the church we have to ask ourselves, “Are these arguments really important in the grand scheme of things? Do my words help others believe in the risen Lord who has given us a picture of God’s grace in the flesh ... or do my words bring discouragement and dissension?”

The resurrection should be our one and only focus in the church. It’s like a mission statement. Any successful organization has an implicit or explicit mission statement.

A while back Ford Motor Company got a reputation for building shoddy cars. And so they changed their mission statement to “quality is job one.”

In the same way when Christians find themselves bogged down in arguments about trivial matters, maybe they need to think about their mission statement. What is most important about the Christians faith?

Paul said (and I heartily agree) that the heart of the Christian faith is the resurrection. Take away the resurrection and the Christian faith makes no sense. Paul put it well in his first letter to the Corinthians.

He wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

If you want to draw a line in the sand when it comes to Christian doctrine, I would suggest that we draw that line at the resurrection.

If God was in Christ and Christ was raised from the dead then the whole world changed in an instant. If Christ is not raised maybe we should take up some other religion.

RESURRECTION LIVING

Aside from this one fundamental the rest is merely commentary. How we take communion, how our church is organized, whether we say the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer as a part of our service, and what color we paint the fellowship hall are not things that we should wrangle over!

These things are not fundamental to our faith, and our internal controversies over these issues can "ruin those who listen" to them. How many people have left the church and even the Christian faith because our wrangling over words has turned them off?

Now we do have to make decisions in the church. Like it or not every month we must have a session meeting. Every two years we must have a General Assembly and every quarter we must have a Presbytery meeting.

We have to make decisions about how we worship, how we are organized, and even what color we are going to paint the fellowship hall. But, as we make these big and small decisions we must keep our minds focused on the big picture.

What we decide is often not as important as how we decide. How we treat each other as we make difficult decisions often tells us more about what we believe than the content of our faith statements.

If we believe in the resurrection, if we believe that there is hope for this life and the life to come, that great hope will influence our interactions with others.

FAITH IN FEARFUL TIMES

In these uncertain times our society is filled with anxiety about many things, and the church is not immune to that anxiety.

Many of the churches in our Presbytery are struggling to keep staff and do ministry because the financial downturn has affected their church adversely. We have to make

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difficult decisions and often this financial pressure is causing tense meetings and a great deal of wrangling.

But, if we think times are tough now, just look at what the church was going through when Paul wrote this letter to Timothy.

The church was undergoing intense persecution.

Paul was in prison for his faith and would soon be executed.

Many had deserted the faith and some of the churches Paul had founded were falling apart. Some in the church thought that young Timothy might not be up to the task of taking over for Paul.

And what does Paul say in the midst of all this fear and persecution?
“I may be in chains. But, the Word of God is not chained.” (2 Timothy 2:9)

Even while he was in chains Paul could affirm the power of the resurrection; the power of God’s Word made flesh was more powerful than even the strongest prison.

When the going gets rough we have a choice to make. Either we affirm the power of the risen Christ by our words and our actions or we deny him because of our fears. Either we affirm the power of God’s salvation or we allow the chains of the world to hold us captive.

That’s what happened to Peter.

Peter didn’t set out to deny Jesus. He was in many ways one of the bravest disciples. But, even the bold Peter succumbed to fear and denied his Lord during the time of trial.

That’s why we shouldn’t be too smug when it comes to our faith. If bold Peter denied his Lord we certainly could do the same thing during a time of testing. We too are apt to focus on our fears instead of faith, and that will lead to dissension and discouragement.

Paul talked about the insidious nature of fearful, profane chatter in a very colorful way. Paul wrote that their talk would spread like “gangrene.”

Those of you who have been in a church during a difficult, anxious time know the truth of this statement. Faith can be contagious, but fear can also be contagious.

WORKERS INSTEAD OF WRANGLERS

How can those of us who lead the church help promote an atmosphere of faith instead of fear?

According to Paul we need to be workers instead of wranglers. As Christians we have a particular job to do. We are called to explain God's word in a careful (and I think) calm way. (2 Timothy 2:15)

Now, according to Paul this job requires hard work. He told Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth."

The Bible is the record of God's justice and love toward God's people. The sixty-six books of the Bible were written over many, many years and the historical background for these books varies widely.

But, we believe that knowledge of the Word is necessary in order to understand the power of the Word made flesh.

It's easy to shoot from the hip and wrangle over our personal beliefs. Sometimes we just take our personal views and baptize them with a thin veneer of faith.

We're not really studying God's word; we're trying to find passages that support what we already believe.

This will always generate more heat than light!

But, Paul tells Timothy that he is called to do something much more difficult.

He is called to study God's word so that he can provide a word of truth instead of truthless chatter.

When I was at seminary some of the professors warned us against using a Scripture text as a "pretext" to say what we wanted to say.

Try as I might to avoid it I'm sure I have been guilty of doing that from time to time.

But, this is not just a problem for preachers. It is a problem for all Christians.

If we are to take God's word seriously, we must begin at the heart of the gospel, the justice and love of God as revealed in Jesus and then work outwards to try and understand in ever-greater detail the story of God's gracious salvation.

It is this deeper understanding of God's word that allows us to become "explainers" instead of "wranglers."

HIS STORY BECOMES OUR STORY

In this way the Word of God becomes more than just a story; it becomes a part of our story. The Word becomes flesh in our own life. The love and justice of God become evident in what we do and say.

I think many of us do not appreciate the power of words.

One wrong word and a relationship can be harmed forever. One wrong word and a politician can go down to defeat. One wrong word and a church can be thrown into conflict and turmoil.

Unfortunately we will not always get our words right. There will be times when we will throw words around like hand grenades ... carelessly attacking the character and integrity of those around us. There will be times when our words are selfish, designed to get only what we want.

But, as a people who are dedicated to studying the Word above all words we must learn to practice self-discipline. We must learn to think before we speak and study before we teach.

The Christian life is hard work. According to Paul, Christians are called to endure verbal jabs and even persecution in search of a greater goal.

Now don't misunderstand. This doesn't mean that we sit back and allow injustice and intolerance to win the day. The Bible is the story of God's people standing up to the falsehoods of the day with a Word of truth.

But, the power of the Christian path lies in the way that the message is proclaimed.

Jesus could have called down legions of angels and destroyed those who tormented him on the cross. And yet he didn't do it that way.

Instead, he taught his disciples the way of forgiveness and grace. He explained God's will and allowed that gracious Word to take root in his followers.

Jesus never tried to argue anyone into the Kingdom of Heaven. He tried to love them into the Kingdom.

And when the very people he loved crucified him, he forgave them from the cross. The power of that love and forgiveness was vindicated by the resurrection.

And we are called to live by the power of that love and forgiveness.

RIGHTLY EXPLAIN THE WORD OF TRUTH

Paul tells us that the reason we are to study the Bible diligently is not to gain the upper hand on our theological opponents. We are to “rightly explain the word of truth.”

In other words the purpose of our study is to enable us to get beyond our own prejudices and desires. What does the Bible (the whole Bible) really say on this topic?

When I prepare a sermon, I find that I often preach the sermon first to me. The best sermons are those that convict me and show me some aspect of my life where I am not following God’s will.

Invariably in some way the grace of God as revealed in Jesus is not in the center of my thinking. In some way instead of living as a child of the resurrection I am living as a slave to fear.

And the really hard part of preaching each week is to be honest about my own shortcomings, to allow the Word of Truth to convict me before I speak to you.

And I would suggest that in your study of the Bible if you are not convicted in some way by your study, you haven’t studied hard enough. You haven’t really heard the word of truth.

We live in a culture that seems to value winning over truth. These negative political ads on TV are so biased that they are sometimes quite amusing ... except for the fact that many people actually make their decisions based on those negative ads.

The result is that we live a world that creates more heat than light. Instead of explaining things in all their complexity we have opted to for the motto that winning is everything. We seem to think that as long as my viewpoint prevails, nothing else matters.

This is human nature. And I have seen the same insidious philosophy at work in the church. Indeed some people seem to define being a Christian as being the one who can make the best argument!

The same problem has plagued the church from the very beginning. They were wrangling over words in Paul’s day, and if you read church history you will learn that we have been wrangling over words ever since!

LIVING THE WORD

Now don’t misunderstand. Doctrine is important. What we believe is important. But, it is possible to have totally orthodox beliefs and still not represent the grace of God in your life.

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Our job is not to wrangle with others; our job is to study God's Word and explain it. Our job is not to go on and on about what we believe. Our job is to so learn God's Word so thoroughly that his thoughts become our thoughts.

I like the way Paul put it in his second letter to the Corinthians, "... we take every thought captive to obey Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:5)

The final judge in life is not what I think or what you think. The final arbiter is the Word of Christ as revealed in the Bible. And it is that Word that we must obey not only in theory but also in practice.

God help us be workers instead of wranglers. God help us study and clearly explain the Word of truth ... in what we say and in what we do.

Amen.