

## Maintaining Doctrinal Integrity

As Paul writes the second epistle to Timothy from prison in Rome. For the second time he had been sent to appear before Nero to "give answer" for his faith and missionary labours. All had forsaken him. "No man stood with me", he writes. This faithful preacher was suffering persecution, facing a martyr's death, but still holding fast to his faith. Timothy, meanwhile, was in Ephesus, weeping at the news of such developments (1:4).

Paul writes to encourage Timothy, his "dearly beloved son" not to be ashamed or afraid. He exhorts Timothy not to be like those who, being unsound in mind and fearful in spirit, were ashamed of the testimony of the Lord and of his imprisonment; but rather, to "be partaker of the afflictions of the gospel, according to the power of God" (1:8).

But there are so many false teachings! Which gospel is worth living and dying for, Paul? God who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (1:9-10). This gospel. The apostolic gospel of God's sovereign, particular, saving grace in Jesus Christ. This is the gospel which the Church is called to uphold in its capacity as pillar and ground of the truth (1Tim.3:15). Paul was willing to suffer and die rather than forsake or allow any corruption of it. It is most certainly a treasure to be held fast and kept.

That is exactly the calling Paul sets before Timothy, every Christian minister, and the Christian Church in all ages. Hold fast the form of sound words ... the good thing which was committed unto thee keep, by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us (v13-14). Further, we are to keep in mind our duty to the next generation: commit (this good thing) to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also (2:2). That, brethren, is a call to maintain our doctrinal integrity. We must maintain the integrity of the form of sound words, for that it the only means of preserving the gospel in our midst, and for the generation to come. In a age of doctrinal apostasy and indifference we must hear and heed this command of our Lord.

Consider something of what this command means for us today. Firstly, we notice the good thing committed unto us; secondly, our calling toward it; and thirdly, our motivation. **The Good Thing Committed To Us**

From the context it is evident that the good thing committed to Timothy, and the Christian Church, is the form of sound words, the doctrines that constitute the apostolic gospel. By describing the truth as a form of sound words Paul warns us that not everything that goes under the name of "gospel" is sound. False doctrine is Satan's most successful device against the Church, after all. The Church is to discern and judge between the sound and unsound, truth and error. Soundness speaks of purity, wholeness, health, strength, and life; which makes it perfectly adapted to produce soundness in the one who receives it. This stands in stark contrast to that form of words that is corrupted. The form of sound words is corrupted whenever it is added to or taken from by men. Then it becomes unsound; that is, impure, subject to error and decay; and by its very nature, adapted to produce evil fruits in those who receive it. This unsoundness can so pervert the gospel that it becomes another gospel, the reception of which, removes one from the grace of Christ, (Gal.1:6-7). Doctrinal integrity is of the utmost importance.

Paul received the pure gospel of Jesus Christ by direct revelation from Christ Himself, and was commissioned to preach and teach it to the Gentiles (2Tim.1:11, Gal.1:12). Timothy, however, learned it from Paul's preaching, teaching and writings as the form of sound words. In turn, he was to teach it, pure and entire, to other faithful men who could in turn pass it on to others. The form of sound words has, therefore, two aspects; a Divine origin and a faithful maintenance.

First, Divine revelation is its origin. What Paul received is recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Holy Scriptures contain the pure gospel Christ delivered to the Church by Divine direct revelation. The Scriptures are sound because they are not the product of man, or the Church - but of God. As Paul went on to remind Timothy: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2Tim.3:16). Here is soundness that comes from GOD to his Church through the wonder of inspiration as absolute, infallible, inerrant truth - free of any human element to corrupt. It is unmixed, pure, whole, and infallible truth. This is the foundation of the apostles and prophets doctrine upon which the Church is built (Eph.2:20). The Holy Scriptures are the objective and absolute standard of truth, and as such, they are the fundamental law of the Church. Out of their perfect soundness, the form of sound words rises. By this standard the soundness of our form of words is to be judged.

Secondly, this form of sound words is the confession of the true Christian faith that rises out of the Holy Scriptures. The fact that this form of sound words is to be taught by one generation to another indicates that it involves more than passing on the Holy Scriptures. After all, every heretic has his text. The Church must know and be clear about what is true and sound. There must be a common confession of the faith if the truth is to be maintained and defended over against the lie. To this end, Paul speaks of a form, or a public and accepted pattern of sound words. Timothy learned this pattern or form from Paul, as Paul was faithful to teach the truth over against the error so that gospel truth was conveyed accurately, in a structured manner that could be learned and passed on accurately to others. This comes out clearly in verse 9 where we read that God called us ... not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace.

That is the form of sound words that defines the true gospel, the nature of God's grace, and the way of salvation. It is true, all that contradicts is false. That is a form of sound words. This form is the Church's public confession of the truth. In the Church's confession we find that body of sound Christian doctrine that, rising out of Scripture, is to be received as truth in the Church. The authority of this form of sound words rises with it out of Scripture. The form of sound words has derived authority, and is a subordinate standard; Scripture being the supreme standard. Nevertheless, the form of sound words, being a faithful confession of the truth of Holy Scripture, is authoritative. It is the pattern by which orthodoxy, or soundness in the faith is tested by the Church. This form of sound words functions, therefore, as the constitutional law of the Church.

This being true, where do we find the form of sound words today? Its content is exactly the same as that which Timothy received. This form of sound words has not changed, but it has been progressively developed and unfolded in the history of the Christian church. The Holy Ghost, as promised (John 16:13-15) has been leading the Church deeper into its understanding of the truth of Holy Scripture. This leading has been through doctrinal conflict and controversy. Time and again, the Church is called to declare its form of sound words, over against new errors and heresies. Each time the form of sound words comes to a clearer definition, and the Church's understanding of the truth is broadened and deepened. Consider the early developments of the form of sound words. Jewish Legalism called forth the clear definition of justification by faith alone. Gnosticism and Docetism required a further confession of the true and complete humanity of Christ. Arianism unfolded the truth of the Trinity and true and complete Divinity of Christ, the Son of God become flesh. The Christological controversies unfolded the union of the two natures in one undivided person of the Son of God. Pelagianism opened up the doctrines of man's total depravity and absolute dependence upon free grace: and so it has continued down through the ages, through the great Reformation, through the post Reformation controversies with Arminianism, Antinomianism, and Amyraldianism, to our day. At each point the form of sound words rises out of Scripture to repel the error and enters into the confession of the church.

This tried, tested, and proven confession of the Church that has been hammered out in the crucible of conflict is the form of sound words in the true Church today. It is a most precious heritage of the Spirit's work in the Church. The EPC, in God's great mercy and grace, have received the form of sound words. That form of sound words we receive in the Westminster Confession of faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms. This is the good thing committed into our care and keeping. It is form of sound words in which we confess the pure gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. After the Holy Scriptures, it is the most precious possession we have. For in it we find the form of sound words that rise out of Holy Scripture. Through it we possess the apostolic gospel, as it has been maintained, guarded and developed in the Church through out the ages. In this confession we are one with the true Church of Jesus Christ in all ages. Oh, how we should treasure this heritage of truth! It is what we must receive into our hearts, maintain, defend, preach and teach as a true church of Jesus Christ in 1998. Our Calling Toward It

We are called to hold it fast, and guard it carefully. This duty is clear from verses 13 and 14. Hold fast ... and ... keep requires of us that we both maintain and defend the form of sound words.

There is no room in the faithful Church of Christ for that spirit of slackness, compromise, or wicked indifference toward the doctrines of the faith which characterises our age. Pluralism and relativism define our post-modern age. Church members and ministers reject the very idea that there can be truth, consequently they decry sound doctrine and cry up spirituality and practical godliness in contrast to it - as if these are mutually exclusive. Or as if one could know true spirituality apart from true knowledge of God. Doctrine kills, orthodoxy deadens, and in its place the church needs to be filled with the Spirit by breaking free of the chains of doctrinal and confessional integrity. This spirit enters even the Reformed churches too. They grow cold to the great verities of the faith, depart from the form of sound words, and begin to tolerate error and heresy in the Church. Men plead for a little compromise or toleration of unsound views for the sake of peace and unity. Love overlooks doctrinal differences, they say. This new spirit and form of words, it is claimed, is the good thing we ought to hold fast and keep. Brethren, this is the spirit of our age. It is unsound. At its very heart, it is unsound.

The command we have before us does not allow for such an attitude. Our duty is to hold fast and keep the form of sound words. The primary reference is to office-bearers and especially ministers of the Word; for Paul writes to Timothy, a minister of the gospel.

Holding fast means to embrace the form of sound words into our mind and heart with faith and love. It means to be so convinced of its truth and of our need to adhere to it as the good news that has brought to light life and immortality - that we would rather lose anything else, everything else, than be separated from the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the good thing that possesses our heart and to which our heart cleaves in love; for in it we find our God and Saviour, or rather are found by Him. This believing reception creates a vice like grip of faith and love, so that by the power of the indwelling Spirit of truth, we cleave to the form of sound words as the truth. Notice, therefore, that this holding fast is firstly a matter of true faith and love. It is not enough to submit to a Creed. We must believe and love the truth!

There is also a vitally important institutional dimension to this calling. How can we hold fast as Church institute? The answer is, by strict subscription. We must see to it that what God's Word requires of each minister spiritually, is, to the utmost of our ability, a living reality in the Church. As Church, therefore, we require all office-bearers, with special

emphasis upon ministers of the gospel, to subscribe to our Doctrinal Standards, the form of sound words, as the confession of their own faith. All office-bearers are required to subscribe to the Church's doctrinal standards, with a good conscience, and without mental reservation. They must subscribe to the whole and all its parts; not merely to the general sentiments or thrust of it, but to the propositional truth that is set forth therein. They do so by solemn oath before God and His Church. In short, we require a complete and strict subscription to the form of sound words accepted in this Christian Church. There is no other way that the Church institute can hold fast and maintain doctrinal integrity. There must be doctrinal standards that express the Church's understanding of what constitutes the form of sound words; and these must be authoritative and legally binding in her midst. There must be a formal and legal binding required by the church of all her ministers; and at the same time a willing self-binding of all her ministers and elders to the form of sound words. Holding fast requires this.

We do this by means of our formula of subscription that must be signed by every elder and minister of the gospel. That formula reads in part: "I do hereby declare, that I do sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith, approved by this Church, to be the truths of God; and I do own the same as the confession of my faith; as likewise I do own the purity of worship presently authorised and practiced ..... I promise, that through the grace of God, I shall firmly and constantly adhere to the same, and to the utmost of my power shall in my station assert, maintain, and defend the said doctrine, worship, discipline, and government of this church ..... renouncing all doctrine, tenets, and opinions whatsoever, contrary to, and inconsistent with, the said doctrine, worship and discipline, government, or jurisdiction of the same."

That brethren, is what is positively required of a Church that would hold fast to the form of sound words. It willingly binds itself through its office-bearers to that form by solemn oath and legal obligation.

That is the positive requirement, but there is need also of a negative sanction if the positive requirement is to be maintained against heretics that arise from within. Paul instructs Timothy to keep, or guard this good thing. It must be defended, protected, or hedged about to keep it from the corruption of error.

The Church guards the doctrinal integrity of the form of sound words by negative sanctions. By negative sanctions we mean a judicial exclusion from office; or deposing from office as the case may be, of any man who does not hold fast to the form of sound words. The Church maintains the judicial right to judge a man's doctrine by the doctrinal standards received in the Church as its constitutional law; the standards, as we have seen, to which every office-bearer willingly and legally binds himself at his ordination. Should a man forsake this form of sound words and become unsound in his beliefs and teaching, he must expect to come under the negative sanction of the courts of the Church. The Church, in order to keep the good thing committed to it possesses authority and power to depose that man from holding office and teaching in the Church. Negative sanctions are absolutely necessary if the church is to guard her doctrine against false teachers. Without negative sanctions, the holding fast of strict subscriptionism lacks credibility and integrity. It is the faithful exercise of negative sanctions that guards the church against heresy from within.

Honesty requires two things of us all at this point. First, should any office-bearer of the Church, come to the place where he can no longer with good conscience subscribe to the Confession as his own, he must immediately make his change of mind known to the Church. He may not proceed to quietly work away at teaching his views or publish his divergent views abroad in the Church. He must either resign, or bring an overture to the highest court of the church seeking her to amend her confession - but he has no right to take up a contrary or inconsistent doctrine and hope to maintain his place in the church. Honesty requires it, negative sanctions must ensure it. Secondly, honesty requires that if the Church ceases to believe a particular article of its doctrinal standards, it makes the necessary alteration to bring it in to line with its conviction of what God's Word does teach. Should the Church fail to do this it loses its doctrinal integrity and its ability to exercise negative sanctions. This is so, because the Church that ceases to believe its own confession, and lives a lie on a minor point, leaves the way open for the heretic to argue for toleration of his views on any point. Either the Church has doctrinal integrity or it does not. It can not have a bit both ways. The Church that tolerates a small deviation forfeits its ability to exercise negative sanctions. We must take this matter very seriously.

The church that holds fast to the form of sound words and would guard it against the admixture of error, MUST exercise negative sanctions against those office-bearers who cease to hold fast - when and as required. We must hold fast in faith and love. That is the way of true unity and blessing from the Lord. It is the good way. Our Motivation

First, we must be motivated by faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. We are to hold fast - in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Faith and love move us, compel us to hold fast this form of sound words.

Our motivation must not be carnal self-interest. It must not be an intellectual exercise that contends about minor points out of a love of contention. It must not be a party spirit that delights to find fault and hang a man for a word. It certainly must not be a sectarian spirit. Rather, we must be motivated by that faith and love which draws us through the truth to Christ Jesus as our all in all. Christ Jesus comes to us, and is found by us, only through the truth. This gospel, contained in the form of sound words, is the only means through which we can learn Christ and the way of salvation in Him. As believers we know that it is in the form of sound words, the pure gospel, that we learn Christ Jesus, the way, the truth and the life. We know that this truth is faithful; it taught us what we did not want to hear, but had to learn; namely, that we

are by nature totally depraved and lost sinners. We are profoundly grateful that this truth was not abandoned or watered down! For it is necessary knowledge. How else would we be awakened and brought to see our need of Christ that we might flee to Him for refuge when He called us? We know that through the pure gospel Christ crucified is presented to us in all his glory, suitability and sufficiency as the only Saviour of lost sinners. Here is hope, life and immortality brought to light by the gospel! We can never forsake this! We know that the Spirit applied this gospel for our effectual calling, uniting us to Christ by faith so that we received and now rest upon him alone for our justification, sanctification and glorification. Through the pure gospel we have hope and comfort even amidst all our failings and sins. Who among us would forsake this? Through this pure gospel, brethren, we have been brought to love him and to live for him. This could never be, where it not that there is indeed a form of sound words that is the very truth of God. We know, that this same truth is the only means of salvation for other lost souls. God's elect must hear this gospel! How could we forsake that truth? Who would dare? To do so would be to forsake Christ Jesus. Brethren, faith and love move us to hold fast and keep this treasure.

Secondly, notice, that it belongs to true spirituality to hold fast the form of sound words. We hold fast and keep this form of sound words by the Holy Ghost which dwells in us (v14). The indwelling of the Spirit is the possibility of our holding fast, certainly; but the Spirit's powerful operations also move and motivate us to this good work. It belongs to true spirituality, declares the apostle, to have an unwavering determination to guard the form of sound words. Contrary to prevailing opinion of our time, it is not an unspiritual man who is concerned about, and contends for sound doctrine when necessary. Paul instructs us here true spirituality will be vitally concerned with, and active in maintaining, promoting and defending the doctrines of the faith. The Spirit filled believer is called to this duty. It is an aspect of the true spirituality.

This is so because the Holy Spirit who is sent from Christ to apply redemption, and to dwell in the members of Christ's mystical body is the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13). The Spirit and the truth are inseparable. One may never set the Spirit against the form of sound words. The Spirit gave us the form of sound words. He is who moved the holy men to speak, thereby giving the Holy Scriptures (2 Peter 1:21). He is the one who leads the Church into all truth throughout its history (John 16:13); thereby unfolding the form of sound words we receive in our Westminster Confession. Now, as the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit works through that truth to move the mind, affections, and will to the spiritual exercises of faith and love. It is the Spirit who works in the believer both to will and to do of God's good pleasure. The Spirit leads us to hold fast and to keep the form of sound words. Thus it is totally contrary to the Spirit for a believer to be indifferent to, or disinclined to hold fast and keep the truth! Genuine and steadfast commitment to the form of sound words, and a determination to maintain our doctrinal integrity is required of a minister of the gospel in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

Finally, in chapter 2 verse 2 we learn that our calling to pass the form of sound words on to faithful men, and to the generations to come in the Christian Church must also motivate us to hold it fast. What we have been given, we must faithfully keep pure and entire for the next generation of Christ's Church. Undoubtedly this involves the church in faithful preaching and teaching the form of sound words to all are, or would come into, membership of the Church of Jesus Christ. It requires faithful catechising of the youth in all our congregations. We must be faithful to do that. It must not be left undone, lest we fail to pass on the knowledge and love of the truth. It also involves our calling as church to train our own students for the ministry, that they be adequately and accurately instructed in the faith we hold to be the form of sound words. We must do this so that the next generation of ministers might be equipped to teach others also. This is most necessary if we would fulfil our calling to preach the gospel, that needy souls near and far might know the true God and His glory in Christ, through that truth he has committed to us. We are to be motivated by the burning desire that God's name might be glorified in Jesus Christ, in a gathered Church that is full of faith, love and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

Brethren, may God in mercy forgive our many failings and weaknesses in this our calling; stir us up to hold fast the form of sound words in an age of sad apostasy, and lift up the standard of his truth in our land once more.

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