

Feature Article: *DBTS News & Notes* (Winter 2002)

## **“Retaining the Standard of Sound Words”**

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Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 1:13

The danger of doctrinal drift is not just a modern problem—Paul warned Timothy about it 19 ½ centuries ago! The fact of life in an ever-degenerating world is that retaining “the standard of sound words” demands diligence and discernment. Most doctrinal errors creep into the system, not overtake it by storm. Most formerly faithful churches and institutions were not “lost” overnight, but through a series of gradual changes.

A quote by William G. T. Shedd from the late 1800s serves as a good reminder to us in light of our text:

Honesty is as important in theology as in trade and commerce, in a religious denomination as in a political party. Denominational honesty consists, first, in a clear unambiguous statement by a church of its doctrinal belief; and, second, in an unequivocal and sincere adoption of it by its members. Both are requisite. If a particular denomination makes a loose statement of its belief which is capable of being construed in more than one sense, it is so far dishonest. If the creed of the denomination is well-drawn (*sic*) and plain, but the membership subscribe to it with mental reservation and insincerity, the denomination is dishonest. Honesty and sincerity are founded in clear conviction, and clear conviction is founded in the knowledge and acknowledgement of the truth.

Shedd wrote these words in the midst of a doctrinal debate that was eventually lost—the standard was dropped, not retained. These are good words for a day like ours that seems more inclined to blur doctrinal distinctives in favor of supposedly promoting unity and cooperative action. Churches can easily fall prey to the same misguided mindset. All it really takes for a church to fall is one generation of church members who minimize doctrine in favor of relationships or activity. The same is true for associations of churches, educational institutions, mission boards, etc. As soon as other things, even if they are good things, take priority over maintaining doctrinal honesty, the fall has begun.

This is one reason why DBTS is unapologetic that theology is the centerpiece of its curriculum. The local church is “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and God’s pattern for the local church is to be led and fed by men who are “constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 4:6). Sound doctrine is essential to effective pastoral ministry—God singles out diligence in this area as worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17), as the characteristic of those who are to be appreciated by the flock (1 Ths. 5:12), and as the key to be approved of God (2 Tim. 2:15; cf. 1 Tim. 4:6). Since we exist to train men

for pastoral ministry, it seems hard to imagine doing this properly without making theology the center of the curriculum!

Yet, some in our day boldly question the role of doctrine in the work of the pastorate. A recent article entitled, “Reinventing Church” suggests that the shift in our culture toward relativism is leading to a change in our view of pastors—“Rather than a seminary-trained theologian dispensing truth, the pastor becomes a facilitator of a joint spiritual journey, encouraging churchgoers' active involvement.” This is not exactly new thinking—a decade ago Leith Anderson made the following observations:

Traditional seminary education is designed to train research theologians, who are to become parish practitioners. Probably they are adequately prepared for neither.

Already we have seen an enormous switch from the traditional Master of Divinity degree to various Master of Arts degrees offered by seminaries. I believe we are on the front end of a long-term trend. We will see more and more students choosing either academic scholarship (the theologians) or parish practice (the pastors).

The institutions will change. They must. Few schools have resources to train both. We will need comparatively few graduate schools of theology and comparatively more schools of professional ministry. Both must move away from the traditional notion of education being time and place, but this switch must especially apply to the preparation of practitioners. They want to be (and the church wants) men and women who can *do* something, not know everything (*A Church for the 21st Century* [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992], pp. 46-47.).

I hope you have the same gut-wrenching reaction to these words that I do—what incredibly misguided thinking! With no proof at all, Anderson assumes that theology and practice are separate, so training should focus on one or the other. Is evangelism something other than communicating theological truths about Jesus Christ, sin, redemption, repentance, faith? Of course not! Can a pastor truly help people struggling with sin in a non-theological way? Isn't the theology of sin and sanctification *exactly* what they need to know and apply? Of course it is!

I wish I could say that such pragmatic thinking exists only among theological liberals and evangelical church growth advocates. Sadly, the fact is that it surfaces too often among fundamentalists. Perhaps not as boldly or directly, but sometimes the “beware of intellectualism” mantra is nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt to downplay doctrinal precision and expositional preaching.

To return to the exhortation of 2 Timothy 1:13, we must remember that maintaining and promoting doctrinal purity is a task of primary importance, not a secondary, incidental ministry task. If we don't “retain the standard of sound words” then the long-term benefits of all our “practical” ministries will eventually come to nothing. While I agree with the old saying, “It takes evangelistic unction to make orthodoxy function,” fundamentalism needs to be reminded that it is after all *orthodoxy* that matters! Evangelicalism is full of fervent evangelists, church growth experts, pastoral practitioners, and practical ministry helpers, but it is also riddled with theological cancer. Fundamentalism is not immune from that same disease, especially if a spirit of doctrinal indifference rises to prominence.

The mission of DBTS is to train men to perpetuate apostolic doctrine—“to retain the standard of sound words.” That mission demands a rigorous commitment to the study of the Scriptures and to the task of organizing its teachings into a comprehensive, unified belief system.

Our desire is to produce a generation of men who know the truth, live the truth, and proclaim the truth with passion and precision. May God help us do that for His glory!