

# Practical Christianity Pt.6

## A Call for Discernment

v.21-22

<sup>21</sup> Test all things; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil.

JUDE

<sup>3</sup> Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

ACTS 17: 10

<sup>10</sup> Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. <sup>11</sup> These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily *to find out* whether these things were so.

The marketplace of evangelical ideas is now overrun with diverse and competing agendas. Even the most seasoned believers can struggle to navigate it. Making matters worse, there are now many evangelical voices spreading dangerous error mixed with a dose of biblical truth. Many believers have been lulled into a false sense of security under once-orthodox preachers and teachers who have veered away from true, biblical north.

John MacArthur doesn't hold back in his assessment of the situation:

*I am convinced that the greatest danger facing Christians today has infiltrated the church already. Countless false teachers already have prominent platforms in the evangelical movement; evangelicals themselves are loath to practice discernment or question or challenge anything taught within their movement; and many leading evangelicals have concluded no doctrine or point of theology is worth earnestly contending for. The evangelicalism movement as we speak of it today is already doomed.<sup>[2]</sup>*

Those false teachers contribute to the problem every time they enter the pulpit. The sermon content in many popular churches leaves congregations at the mercy of prowling wolves:

*Bible teaching, even in the best of venues today, has been deliberately dumbed-down, made as broad and as shallow as possible, oversimplified, adapted to the lowest common denominator—and then tailored to appeal to people with short attention spans. Sermons are almost always brief, simplistic, overlaid with as many references to pop culture as possible, and laden with anecdotes and illustrations. (Jokes and funny stories drawn from personal experience are favored over cross-references and analogies borrowed from Scripture itself.) Typical sermon topics are heavily weighted in favor of man-centered issues (such as personal relationships, successful living, self-esteem, how-to lists, and so on)—to the exclusion of the many Christ-exalting doctrinal themes of Scripture.<sup>[3]</sup>*

The church today has boundless credulity. Anything and everything is accepted. It seems to me that if any one problem

outstrips all the others in the church, it is the utter lack of spiritual discrimination that characterizes Christianity.

Bad decisions, faulty reasoning, superficial understanding, shallow knowledge, widespread ignorance have contributed more anguish to the church throughout her history than all the persecutions combined. Persecutions have taken their toll, but it is the inside chaos and the inside confusion over doctrine that has left the most scars on the church. And this is not only the result of human weakness in discerning truth, but it is the work of Satan who, disguised as an angel of light, wants to confuse us as much as possible.

Error is not only visible at the basic primitive levels of theology but at the deeper and more complex levels, as well. Now this should not happen because we have been duly warned.

Scripture warns us of doctrines of demons, destructive heresies, myths, perverse teachings, commandments of men, speculations, controversial issues, deceitful spirits, worldly fables, false knowledge, empty philosophy, traditions of men, worldly wisdom and it says they are all pitfalls for Christians.

Jesus said **that wolves would come in sheep's clothing.** Paul said, **"grievous wolves will enter in not sparing the flock."** Paul wrote to Timothy and said, **"And as the age goes on, evil men will get worse and worse and deception will increase."** Paul again said, **"There will be doctrines of demons that will lead people astray."**

To put it mildly, there is a world of chaos and confusion in the church. No one who understands Scripture and is aware of its warnings about error should ever be so gullible as to say a statement like that man said that day, "Well there's good in all of it." We cannot for a moment believe that everyone who claims to be in Christ and to speak on behalf of Christ is speaking the truth. But people seem to be so gullible.

In many cases the church, I think, is like the Pharisees of Jesus' day. In Matthew chapter 16, a couple of verses of interest that you might want to note. Matthew 16:1, "And the Pharisees and Sadducees came up and testing him asked him to show them a sign from heaven. But he answered and said to them, 'When it is evening, you say it will be fair weather for the sky is red. And in the morning, there will be a storm today for the sky is red and threatening. Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and a sign will not be given it except the sign of Jonah.' And he left them and went away."

He said, "Your problem is simple. Your limited, primitive, non-scientific knowledge of how to tell the weather exceeds your spiritual discernment." What an unbelievable put down. "You don't know much about the weather, and your way of assessing the weather is very primitive. But as little as you know about weather, you know more about that than you do theology." They had no ability to distinguish between the false and the true. And Jesus condemned them for it.

The undiscerning contemporary church, for example, has often rejected Darwin and Huxley but accepted Freud. Has often rejected doctrine, and favored and embraced relationships, as if they were the priority. Has become fascinated with entertainment and bored with exposition. Has been enamored with feelings and lowered the value of thinking clearly. As a result, evangelical Christianity - listen to this - is fighting for its very life. I'll say that

again. Evangelical Christianity, in my view, is fighting for its very life. And our time cries out for people with discernment.

Now the culture around us doesn't help because we live in a very non-discriminating culture. We live in a culture, in fact, that has put a new and unacceptable definition and value on discernment. For example, it can be simply noted that it used to be that when someone was a person of discrimination, that was an indication of their nobility, an indication of their wisdom, an indication that they were to be honored and respected, they were desirable. That was a person of discrimination, one who could discriminate between good and evil, true and false, what is best.

Now a person who discriminates is somebody who is going to get sued by the ACLU. The word has taken on a completely different meaning. It isn't even allowable in our vocabulary. This is a day that will not tolerate absolutes. This is a day that will not tolerate discrimination of any kind. And I'm not talking about racial discrimination, which is intolerable to God, I'm talking about discrimination of any kind. This is not a time that will tolerate convictions. This is not a time that will tolerate dogma.

## ***The Text***

<sup>21</sup> Test all things; hold fast what is good. <sup>22</sup> Abstain from every form of evil.

**“But examine everything,”**

the Greek text says - “carefully” as you'll note in the New American Standard is in italics, meaning it was added.

The text actually says, “But examine everything.” The word “**examine**” is *dokimazō*, that's a familiar word to New Testament students because it is often used to refer to something being tested to reveal its genuineness. It is sometimes used of testing metals.

**Examine** (1381)(*dokimazo* from *dokimos* = tested, proved or approved, tried as metals by fire and thus purified from *dechomai* = to accept, receive) means to assay, to test, to prove, to put to the test, to make a trial of, to verify, to discern to approve. It means to test in order to verify the character of something. John uses the same verb to inform his readers that they should put the content of prophetic speech to the test

“Test everything to see that it is genuine,” to distinguish between what is true and false, what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, separate the wheat from the chaff. This process, by the way, to borrow Paul’s words to the Ephesians, is an effort to learn what is pleasing to the Lord, to distinguish. The word could be to judge. Judge everything, evaluate everything, distinguish everything and “everything” means everything, all things. We are to be like King David who was able to discern, says **2 Samuel 14:17**, good from evil.

Now once you have discerned that, what does he say? Verse 21, “Hold fast to that which is good.” “Hold fast” means to embrace, to embrace wholeheartedly, to take possession of. The word “good,” that familiar word *kalos* means “what is in itself good, genuine, true,” not just fair to look at, not just lovely and beautiful appearing, but what is inherently genuine, true, noble, right, and good. When you find that, embrace it, hold on to it.

Verse 22 says, “**Abstain from every form of evil.**” And the word “abstain” is a very strong word. It means to “hold oneself away from.” The preposition *apa* is there. It means to “shun.” And it

emphasizes the complete separation of the believer from what is deemed evil in teaching and behavior. When you see something that is evil, not true, false, shun it.

There never is in the Scripture given any latitude for us to expose ourselves to what is not true. We are to shun it. We are to run from it. It emphasizes then the complete separation of the believer from what is deemed evil. Evil here is evil in the active sense, as something malignant, harmful, working injury and disaster to everyone who touches it. It is poisonous, it is deadly. Stay away from it like you would stay away from a plague.

**Lenski was correct when he wrote,** “The worst forms of wickedness consist of perversions of the truth, spiritual lies, although today many look upon these forms with indifference and regard them rather harmless.” The fact that moral perversions are included is self-evident, these also work to destroy the spiritual life and appear in many forms. Yes, in the word evil is moral perversion.

But he’s right, the worst form of it is the perversion of the truth.

Now notice again verse 22. He says, “You are to shun every form.” Every form. The word “form” there, it’s just a simple word. It means “kind, sort, species, or shape.”

He is saying, “Evil in any form, evil at any shape, evil of any sort, evil of any kind. Once you have discerned it, shun it.” And yes, that encompasses moral conduct, moral perversion. But the heart of what he is saying here has to do with the perversion of truth. This, then, becomes primarily for us a call for discernment. A call for discernment.

## **Question 1**

## Why is there such a lack of Discernment in the Church

### A. The Weakening of Doctrinal Clarity and Conviction

There were much better times in the church when we were much clearer in our understanding of Doctrine

Today, those who take firm stands on biblical doctrine are very frequently criticized for splitting hairs and being unloving because the norm today is to gaze lazily at the surface of scriptural truth and then even justify such cavalier shallowness as the desirable generosity of spirit toward those who differ. This is rampant in the church. You sort of just scan Scripture and you don't want to be too dogmatic because if you're dogmatic that's unloving to someone else who has a different opinion. And after all, we certainly don't want to split hairs.

**Jay Adams writes, "Nowhere is this tendency more apparent than in Christian counseling." He also writes, "Self-styled experts in psychology, sociology and education who hold Ph.D.s in their fields and Sunday school degrees in Bible pontificate on Christian teaching and life setting themselves up as spokesmen for God."**

What he is basically saying is that the matter of biblical interpretation has been invaded by people who are ill equipped to do that work. There is a lack of discernment, however, not only in the arena of counseling, but there is a lack of doctrine and conviction in the ministry in general, it seems to me. Sharing has replaced preaching.

It is not an accident that the church, in the name of unity, love and relationships, has moved away from clarity, and conviction, and doctrine, and has begun to favor openness, rejecting narrowness and dogmatism. This has been the prevailing climate in the culture around us. In fact, there's a war on standards. The war on standards is wholesale, isn't it? I mean, if you had a conviction about something it would have to be utterly arbitrary because there isn't any standard. Revisionist history has now questioned everything that historians have believed. Science, even in the field of science they're questioning things that for years have been believed. All beliefs have become only relatively true and only relatively valuable, whether you're talking about sociology, psychology, philosophy, economics, education or whatever you're talking about.

### **Martyn Lloyd Jones saw it coming**

He saw the trend coming, the trend of relativism in the church and the death of doctrinal clarity back in 1971, twenty years ago.

**And this is what he said.** “There's a very obvious reaction at the present time against intellectualism. This is found among the students in America and increasingly in this country. Reason is being distrusted and set on one side. Following D.H. Lawrence, many are saying that our troubles are due to the fact that we have overdeveloped our cerebrum. We must listen more to our blood and go back to nature.

“And so turning against intellectualism and deliberately espousing the creed of irrationality, they yield themselves to the desire for experience and place sensation above understanding. What matters is feeling and enjoyment, not thought. Pure thought leads nowhere.”

Twenty years ago Martyn Lloyd-Jones saw the movement of relativism coming into the church.

David Watson says “I don't want to preach because the truth can be better communicated through the performing arts.” May I

remind somebody that Jesus was not a singer, he was a preacher? And John the Baptist was not a singer, he was a preacher. And the apostles were not actors, they were preachers.

David Watson went on to criticize the Christian church for concentrating exclusively on the mind. This is what Watson said, "Most churches rely heavily on the spoken or written Word and then wonder why so few people find the Christian faith to be relevant." He is saying the written Word and the spoken Word make the Christian faith irrelevant.

Relevant Christianity is not mental. Relevant Christianity is not rational. It is not doctrinal. It is emotional. It is experiential. It is mystical.

Satan knew we Christian evangelicals would not buy the theology of liberalism so he sold us the hermeneutics.

God's Word will never pass away, but sadly it has been bypassed to allow for the new evangelical relativism. Preachers are comedians, story tellers and counselors, but not powerful theological heralds and proclaimers of divine truth.

*Power Evangelism* by John Wimber - in that book called *Power Evangelism*, in which he instructs the church on how to evangelize, there is no discussion of the gospel. It isn't in the book.

The gospel isn't in the book, yet they give accounts of people getting saved and becoming Christians on the basis of supposed miracles they saw with no gospel preached to them. Peter Wagner says - professor over at Fuller Seminary - that Argentine evangelist Omar Cabrera has people saved before he starts preaching. They're not concerned with doctrine, apparently.

Doctrine divides.

People say, “Oh doctrine divides. Doctrine divides.” I say, “Amen. Preach it. Doctrine divides.” You know what it does? It confronts error. It separates true from false. It makes judgments. Today’s climate, however, of unity in the priority of relationships, that’s not tolerable.

Everybody talking about heaven ain’t going there. And everybody talking about Jesus: Charismatics, neo-orthodox, Roman Catholics and everybody else, don’t necessarily know him.

## **B. A Failure to be Antithetical**

I mean to be black and white.

In debate, in argument, in theology, we talk about thesis and antithesis. A thesis is some truth that’s laid down or some idea that’s laid down, or some concept that’s laid down, and here is the opposing concept. Black and white, thesis, antithesis. We have to think antithetically. We live in a culture that, some say, thinks on what you could call a continuum. In other words, there’s no black/white. There’s no right/wrong, true/false, good/bad. There’s just this long continuum of relative shades of gray. And everybody sort of is on their on there somewhere. Religion is subjective, spiritual experience is subjective.

biblical preaching is not relative. It is not subjective. It is absolute. It is sharply black and white. It is pointedly antithetical to error.

we have a culture growing up with continuum kind of thinking, that things are not black and white, they’re just different shades of gray. Black and white preaching, teaching from Scripture, is seen as offensive and fanatical. But in the Bible, antithesis is crucial,

discernment is essential. And the Bible just lays things down black and white.

I mean, just follow this thought. From the Garden of Eden with its two trees - one allowed and one forbidden - to the eternal destiny of the human being - in heaven or hell - the Bible sets forth two and only two ways: God's way and all other ways. People are said to be saved or lost. They belong to God's people or Satan's people. There is the mount of blessing and the mount of cursing. There is the narrow way and the broad way. There is eternal life and eternal destruction. There are those who are against us and those who are with us. There are those within the kingdom, those without the kingdom.

There is life and death, truth and falsehood, good and bad, light and darkness, kingdom of God, kingdom of Satan, love, hatred, spiritual wisdom, wisdom of the world. Christ is said to be the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by him. He is the only name under the sky by which one may be saved. Everything in Scripture is absolute. It is basic to divine revelation.

Jay Adams, who is a very well-known preacher and seminary professor, writes what I think is an excellent section in one of his books. Listen to this. "Not only will you find such antithetical teaching and much more on nearly every page of the Bible, but even the construction of the Hebrew language itself seems designed to teach antithesis. Much scriptural poetry, many proverbs and even some narrative is antithetical in structure. Perhaps you have wondered about the principle underlying the clean and unclean distinctions of the Old Testament." This is very interesting. "Various relationships or rationales have been given for some of these distinctions, yet many seem to be purely arbitrary." You know, why clean and unclean animals? And all of that in the laws that God gave Israel, this is what he suggests.

“May I suggest that all problems of arbitrariness are resolved when you see the clean/unclean system as a means of alerting the Jew to the fact that all day long every day, in whatever he does, he must consciously choose God’s way. Choices about food, clothing, farming techniques, justice, health care, holidays, and methods of worship were made either God’s way or some other way. In other words, the clean/unclean system was designed to develop in God’s people an antithetical mentality. Forbidding the mixing of materials in clothing, for example, doesn’t seem to arbitrary, after all, when considered in the light of the biblical concern to create a antithetical posture toward life. “But with pastors and people alike growing up in an environment that stresses continual thinking, antithesis is dulled as more and more people attempt to integrate sociology, psychology, business management principles with the Scripture. Teachers in Christian colleges now consider it one of the key tasks of Christian higher education to seek to integrate the professor’s faith with his learning. The key task, you see, is no longer to distinguish God’s ways from others, but to find places of agreement.” That’s a dangerous thing.

**Psalm 1.** “How blessed is the man who doesn’t walk in the council of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and in his law he meditates day and night.”

There’s a clear line drawn. They’re over here. We’re over here.

### **Titus 1:9**

holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

Elders are to be Discerning and able to distinguish between truth and error.

## **C. A preoccupation with image and influence as the key to evangelization.**

The man who once took his stand for truth and preached it is now asked to take his seat. He's a problem. We don't fight for truth. We don't boldly proclaim truth, because we're afraid we might offend an unbeliever. And after all, if anybody is going to get evangelized, it's going to be because they find us a friendly place, a nice place. We want to be popular with the world because we believe that's the key to evangelization. Imagine that. We are in to this whole deal that the image of the church and its non-threatening structure is the key to evangelization. This kind of movement believes that the church will offend unbelievers if it preaches sin, or hell, or repentance, or the cross, and it will lose its prestige. So the new trend is for the church to build an image of love, and care, and being very nice, and make everybody comfortable, and make everybody happy, and entertain the unbeliever, and make sure they're never offended, and make sure they are very, very comfortable. And the bottom line is if they like us, they'll like Jesus. That's the bottom line.

Influence and image is much more important than Scripture. I don't believe the church gathers for any other reason than to be edified. We come together to worship God as believers and for you to be edified. And we scatter to evangelize. We go out to evangelize. And you want to be as loving, and kind, and gracious, as you can be in presenting the truth, but you don't mitigate the truth because you believe influence and image is going to evangelize anybody.

And there was a tremendous cry among evangelicals across this country that something new had happened, because for the first time in evangelistic history in America, liberals - people who were not evangelical fundamental Christians - were invited to cooperate

in that meeting in 1955. An ecumenical evangelism was born, that is, the kind of evangelism that says, “We want everybody to come. So we’ll get the Catholics, and we’ll get the liberals, and we’ll get the neo-orthodox, and the people who don’t believe the Bible, and we’ll get them all together, and we’ll get them all involved.”

Carl Henry, who has been a tremendous contributor to assessing the church, says, “If you look at the early years of the Billy Graham organization, you will find that its overall policy was to attain prestige and influence for evangelicals. To do this, there had to be a successful image and that would not be possible, they believed, unless every effort was made to avoid any division with those who didn’t believe the Bible.”

That was a new day - 1955, brand new day. “The Graham organization,” wrote Henry, “was not ready to forfeit dialogue with the ecumenical leaders and churches because it feared a loss of influence.” That showed up in Fuller Seminary. Edward John Carnell who was on the faculty at Fuller said, “We - ” And I’m quoting him, “We need prestige desperately.” And they went after it.

And when the church began to say, “We’re going to have to have influence. And we’re going to have to have prestige. And we’re going to have to have popularity. We’re going to have to be intellectually accepted. And we’re going to have to embrace these people and show that we really like them. And they’re going to have to like us a lot if they’re ever going to like our Jesus,” it made a major turn. A major turn.

Paul the Apostle said, “We are the scum. We are the dregs. We are the off-scouring of the world.” Jesus said, “They hated me. They’ll hate you.” But we’ve gotten sophisticated. This view believes that our prestige, our influence, and our popularity is what gets people to the place where they’ll believe the gospel. How absolutely wrong that is.

“One of the main characteristics of Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ ministry was thus both an offense to those who were supporters of the spirit of the modern pulpit, and an inspiration to those who believed that a return to authority in preaching was a great need. The latter were profoundly thankful for the very thing which the first group had found faulty.

“Dr. Lloyd-Jones - had a penetrating and courageous diagnosis of the present situation. This is an age of appeasement - not in the political and international sense - but in the realm of Christian affairs and of the church. Winston Churchill is now acclaimed and almost idolized. In the thirties he was severely criticized as an impossible person because he knew what he believed, he believed it, and he caused disturbance by criticizing the policy of appeasement. So it is today. Strong men who stand by their principles are today regarded as being difficult, self-assertive and non-cooperative.”