

Theological Integrity

Sovereign Grace Churches Pastors Conference 2023

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Thank you, Mark, so much.

I do want to add my voice to Mark's. We're so very grateful for everyone who is here, who took the time to join us this week. That is no small thing.

For our guests, we're just so honored that you joined us. We so pray and we have prayed that you would be encouraged and refreshed in Christ this week. That is our prayer and if that happens, we'll be very grateful to God.

To our pastors and wives, how rich it is to be in the same family. We have not only been united with Christ, but we have been united with each other and we're here again together, sharing Christ together, representing Christ together, so thank you so much for your labors. Thank you so much for your time persevering. Thank you so much for laying hold of, as CJ reminded us last night that "But not". We're so grateful for you and the privilege of sharing God's word with such men and your wives, it just every time comes with a deep sense of humbling joy.

Let's turn in our Bibles to Paul's first letter to Timothy, 1 Timothy, Chapter 4.

We have gathered here, not as disconnected, isolated pastors, but we have gathered here as pastors joined in rich partnership in Sovereign Grace. As such, I want to begin with a question.

If there is one factor humanly speaking, most essential to the faithful longevity of Sovereign Grace, what would it be?

One factor. Not the sovereign mercy of God, that's a given, but humanly speaking, in terms of what we do individually, and in our partnership...not prolonging our bare existence, not just surviving, but surviving faithfully.

What one factor will be most essential to our faithful longevity in Sovereign Grace?

If there is a single text that I think crystallizes the answer to that question and the burden behind this message surely, it is 1 Timothy, Chapter 4.

Obviously, a text familiar to all of us, Rocco even mentioned it in his testimony, but I want you to sit back and realize this is not just a text. There is a reality embedded in this text. It is a reality that we must not assume, we must never tire of reflecting upon and applying to our lives, to our pastoral teams, to our churches in Sovereign Grace so let's lay hold of the reality here, okay?

1 Timothy, Chapter 4, I'm going to begin reading in verse 6, on through to the end of the chapter.

A Good Servant of Christ Jesus

6 If you put these things before the brothers,[a] you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. 7 Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; 8 for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. 9 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. 10 For to this end we toil and strive,[b]because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

11 Command and teach these things. 12 Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. 13 Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. 14 Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. 15 Practice these things, immerse yourself in them,[c] so that all may see your progress. 16 Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

This is the word of God.

Now you know the context. Paul is writing to his child in the faith. Timothy converted on his first missionary journey, joined Paul on his second missionary journey. He clearly became not only a loyal friend, a child in the faith, but a trusted coworker.

"I have no one else," Paul wrote, "of kindred spirit who would be genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Philippians."

Paul loved Timothy. He trusted Timothy. This is a personal letter. It's an affectionate letter, but the letter's more than this, which heightens its relevance for us. The situation in Paul's agean ministry had changed.

Congregations had multiplied. They're now churches in Crete and Miletus and Decapolis, but there are storm clouds on the horizon in the form of false teaching. Even signs of a counter mission, which we see evidence of in all three pastoral epistles.

To make matters worse, this apparently included church leaders and former coworkers - normal pastoral ministry. In 2 Timothy 1, Paul says that "*All in Asia turned away from me, among whom were Phygelus and Hermogenes.*" In 2 Timothy 2, he speaks of Hymenaeus and Philetus, who as he says, "*swerved from the truth*". In Titus, he warns of "*divisive people, warped, sinful, self-condemned*".

The Paul of the Pastorals is a man burdened by threats to the church into the mission of the gospel. The Paul of the Pastorals is one whose discerning gaze is fixed on the future of the church and the mission of the gospel. That to me is one of the fascinating and often overlooked aspects of the pastorals. Their context and contribution is critical. This is what's happening, Paul is envisioning a time, envisioning a future when he is off the scene, when the generation of the apostles is gone. At this stage of life, he could have thrown in the towel, but he's not - this is sort of a second career for Paul.

He adopts a different strategy.

Instead of writing letters to churches sent by coworkers, he now writes to the coworkers themselves, like Timothy in Ephesus, Titus in Crete, to instruct them, to encourage them, to equip them to secure a future that Paul would not see. As Paul contemplates what church leadership and pastoral ministry will look like then, when he's gone and for generations to come, he lays out battle plans.

In these letters, he takes pains to describe and define who is to lead the church, elders, and deacons.

Then, especially vital for our context, he specifies their priorities. We see the priorities of a pastor, and there's perhaps no more succinct description of those priorities than Paul's imperative in the familiar verse 16. This is a summary of the prior 10 verses and it's also the concluding stroke in the core of this letter. The body of this letter ends really in Chapter 4 where paraenesis

ethical teaching follows for the rest of the church in Chapters 5 and 6, so here is the concluding stroke of the core of this letter.

Here is the summary: *"Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching."*

As the NIV famously puts it, *"Watch your life and your doctrine closely. Persevere in them."*

The circumstances of ministry change daily.

The responsibilities of ministry never do.

Persevere in them, because if you do - a most sobering if...ministry faithfulness is not inevitable - if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Here is Paul's crystalized definition of pastoral success, and note what he does not mention. He doesn't mention the numerical size of Timothy's church. He doesn't evaluate the extent of Timothy's public gifting. There's nothing here to capture the imagination of blogs and Big Eva.

Two things:

1. Watch your life and your doctrine closely.
2. Watch yourself and the teaching.

The single imperative here, watch, it's not the normal "look" word. It's a grip word. Hold fast. And so he's using it figuratively. Hold this in your unswerving gaze. Give this your unswerving scrupulous attention, and that imperative like all the imperatives in this paragraph suggests a continual ongoing activity. Continually watch your life and doctrine. Relentlessly watch your life and doctrine. Never cease to watch your life and doctrine. This imperative is insulated by a whole web of excitement to strenuous exertion.

Look at verse 15, "practice". In other words, be diligent in these things.

Verse 15 B, "Immerse yourself. Be absorbed in them, give yourself holy to them."

Verse 16, "persist, persevere in them".

Don't stop, don't relent, don't coast, let them throw in the towel, let them be your permanent preoccupation.

Why?

Verse 16 B, "because your very life, your life, the life of the church, the mission of the gospel is at stake.

It's not playing around. The cause could not be more serious. Eternal destinies are in the balance. We're reformed, God is sovereign. We rest in that, but eternal destinies depend on our vigilance concerning the integrity of our lives and the faithfulness of our doctrine.

Now, my assignment this morning is in the second category. A simple yet urgent reminder to watch our doctrine. We're going to assume life because, without that, it doesn't matter. Again, without the doctrine, there is no life. There's no real life, there's no life in Christ, there's no abiding. Jesus doesn't just say, "*Abide in me, have spiritual experiences.*" No, he unpacks verse 5 and verse 7 of John Chapter 15, "*If you abide in me and my words abiding you,*" we cannot abide in Christ without his words shaping us. We'll assume life. We're watching our doctrine this morning to keep a close watch on the teaching, the didascalia.

Paul uses this word 19 times - 15 times in the pastorals. The same word as we begin with in verse 6, the good doctrine Timothy has follows. What's in view here is not simply the gospel. Although, Paul makes clear elsewhere that that is the core, but the reference is to the teaching, to doctrine - authoritative, apostolic instruction. Interesting. Paul always uses this word in the singular, unlike the plural doctrines of demons in Chapter 4, verse 1. He always uses this word in the singular, meaning it's not just multiple random teachings, but it's a body of truth.

An organic, internally consistent, rightly proportion presentation of God's revelation that is to be the source and standard of everything. The source of our teaching, the standard by which all of our teaching and all of our ministry is to be measured. Now, Paul provides another description of this, a very elusive description in 2 Timothy, Chapter 1. Look over there quickly with me. 2 Timothy 1:13. Paul says this, "Follow," he's still at Timothy. He doesn't tire reminding Timothy - "Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

Sound words, healthy words refers to the teaching that Timothy received from Paul and is to pass on to others. What does he say there? These words, this teaching, they have a pattern to them. They are self-consistent. They form a framework. They are complimentary and mutually reinforcing. Here, actually, in a nutshell, is the imperative for systematic theology. God's words form a

coherent framework. They have a pattern, and that pattern is meant to be discerned. We're commanded to grasp it, and teach it, and follow it. It provides a standard. The word is [maybe hypotyposis], a standard by which things are to be measured.

Here's our call as pastors. Here is faithfulness. We are to allow the truth of God's word in all of its dimensions and connections, the teachings derived from it to guide us and to govern us as we teach, as we set ministry priorities, as we go on pastoral retreats or we sit in elders meetings, as we make ministry decisions, as we create ministry structures, as we evaluate other teachings and ideas and blogs and cultural trends to which our people are exposed. It's a vividly suggestive picture Paul gives. It's this that we are to watch closely. We are to be absorbed with it personally. We are to faithfully teach it publicly. We are to measure all that we are and do and teach and build with it.

While Paul is addressing Timothy personally, this command is not merely personal. This is a corporate and universal pastoral obligation. It addresses not just Timothy, but all of those that Timothy sets in office, and all to whom those men would pass it on. Other faithful men who themselves would be able to teach others - 2 Timothy Chapter 2. Paul has a view there for generations. He's got his eyes on the future. Again, Paul is envisioning a future day and future pastors and future church networks and future denominations, setting forth priorities for those pastors, for those churches, for those denominations.

In other words, friends, Paul's talking to us. As he does, these letters are filled with exhortations to a particular obligation, a particular task. This is what is weighing on Paul's mind and occupying his heart. Is it weighing on our minds and occupying our hearts? What will ensure the successful continuity of the gospel mission? Taking into the larger context of the pastorals, what is critical in leadership that will establish the truth and vanquish heresy, nurture believers, sustain churches, and protect the ministry of the gospel? What is it? I encourage you to read these three letters through. The focus, repetition, and emphasis of Paul's answer to that question is almost numbingly striking.

Allow me just a quick survey. This puts in stark relief what those of us who are called to pastoral ministry are called to. 1 Timothy 1, the very beginning of the pastorals 3 and 4, verse 3, *"As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine."* The very first charge in the pastoral epistles is to correct false doctrine. He's not, "Well, let's just encourage everyone, let's just--" No. Correct false doctrine. It's remarkable. He goes on to mention in verse 4, *"Myths and speculations don't relegate that phrase to first-century ideas."*

In other words, he's talking about other ideas, and innovations, and cultural preoccupations that contradict or distract from biblical truth and the gospel to which it testifies. As Paul says in Chapter 1, verse 10 B, Timothy is to avoid, he is to correct whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine. *"In accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted."*

Here is our charge. Timothy is called, we are called, to be alert for discerning of any current of thought, any idea that is distracting our people from Christ or undermining their faith in Christ or displacing Christ in their affections or that is contrary to scriptural teaching, which ultimately testifies to Christ.

1 Timothy 3:2, you know this, the one qualification of the elder that is not obligatory for every Christian, he must be able to teach. A better translation, "he must be skillful in teaching". It is the pastor's peculiar responsibility to teach and pass on the gospel and sound doctrine. We've already looked at Chapter 4, but note again 1 Timothy 4:6, *"If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine,"* same word, *"The good doctrine you have followed."* That's didascalia.

Verse 11, "Command and teach." That's didasco - it's a cognate word, command and teach these things. Verse 13, *"Until I come, devote yourself to three things. The public reading of scripture, to exhortation to teaching."* That's actually not a verb in that text. Again, it's *the teaching*. It's the passing on of authoritative doctrine. Chapter 16, *"Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching."* Good grief, Paul, this all we're supposed to do?! Chapter 5, verse 17, *"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching."*

Chapter 6, verse 2 and 3, *"Teach and urge these things."* If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, well that person is proud. Understands nothing. Titus, his version of the elder qualifications is actually a bit more full on this point. Titus 1:9, *"He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it."*

Here the elder's teaching gift is filled out. It's not simply public speaking ability, and it's certainly not just the conceptual knowledge of a lecturer or a professor. It is a discerning functional knowledge of sound doctrine so that he can impart it to others and refute those who teach falsehood. In other words, the elder is set apart. He's to be given to the spiritual nurture of the people of

God. The doctrinal maturation of the people of God and the protection of the people of God from false and deadly teaching and ideas. Pay attention to Paul's warnings. We don't pay attention enough. He's just warning, warning, warning. That's meant to land on us. It's dangerous!

Your people are walking around every day immersed in worldviews that deny Christ, that deny God's claim on them, that absolutize the world and minimize the eternal. Pay attention to Paul's warnings. Like Timothy, we're called to be alert to false teaching in the church and unbiblical deceptive, seductive ideas and worldviews in the culture. I don't remember in my lifetime a time when the pressure on the church to conform to the culture, to make room for the culture, to accommodate the culture, to let the culture shape our presentation, it's never been greater.

Titus 1:13, *"Therefore rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in the faith."* Titus 2:1, *"But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine."* Chapter 2, verse 15, *"Declare these things, exhort, rebuke with all authority."* Finally, 2 Timothy. We looked at Chapter 1, verse 13, Look at 1:14. 2 Timothy 1:14, *"By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you."* The good deposit is the truth of the gospel. It's actually emphatic in this verse. If I was to render it literally, *"it is the good deposit you are to guard"*, meaning the gospel and all that it means for our lives and Christ's church, and the world. That is what you're to guard.

2 Timothy 2:2, *"And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."*

2 Timothy 2:15, *"Do your best."* That is a zeal word. Be zealous about, you could render it. Take pains with - make your greatest efforts in this area, *"Make your greatest efforts to present yourself to God as one approved a worker who does not need to be ashamed."* Meaning you might be ashamed if you don't heed this. *"A worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."*

Rightly handling it, approaching it reverently, studying it assiduously, proclaiming it passionately - rightly handle it, brothers.

We don't want to be ashamed. Oh, Lord, don't let us be ashamed.

Chapter 2, verses 24 and 25, *"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patient when wrong, gently correcting those in opposition."*

Chapter 3, verse 10, *"You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness."*

Chapter 3, verses 14 and 17, you know this, *"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believe knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been equated with the sacred writings."* The grammata. It's the only time in the New Testament, but very common word in non-Biblical Greek. It's the Old Testament, the sacred writings.

"Knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you've been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

Then he launches into reflection on what these writings are. *"All scripture is breathed out by God"*.

What else do you have to give people? What's breathed out by you, breathed out by God.

Chapter 4, verses 1 and 2, *"Preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season, even when you are afflicted and perplexed and persecuted and struck down. In season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and teaching."* Now, to read these letters is to feel, we're meant to feel, the cumulative weight of these pastoral imperatives.

Did you feel it?

To hold and teach and be guided by, and proclaim and urge upon others and guard sound biblical doctrine and the truth it establishes and the gospel to which it testifies, and the life implications that flow from it, all for the health and strength and protection of those for whom Christ died. That's why we're here this week. Isn't it? The entity that brings us together, that each of us are living to care for and serve and lay down our lives for and see multiply the church of Jesus Christ.

Well, that's my introduction.

The length is intentional - because of the weight of the biblical vision and the pastoral priorities it establishes, and the imperatives it places upon us and, brothers, the clarity and the hope it gives us - which is vital for the future of Sovereign Grace.

Paul is not just giving commands. He's not just loading up weary pastors with more stuff to do. That's not what this pastor's conference is about. We don't bring you here and say, "Well, now do this and now, try this. You're not doing this, and we're going to give you 100 things you ought to be doing that Gospel websites tell you you got to be doing every day."

Paul is not just loading up Timothy with obligations. There are great and glorious realities behind these commands. These words, we are to teach the truth that they contain, they are God-breathed. They're the product of God's own life giving creative breath. They give life. They structure reality. They're living and active. They penetrate and they convict and they transform and they give hope. They bring God to us. They mediate his presence. Christ shines forth from his word and he shines forth from sound doctrine. We're just wanting to position ourselves to be instruments through which Christ can shine forth to our people, which is what they need most.

This is how I believe Paul would answer the question we began with: Humanly speaking, apart from our love for and utter dependence upon Christ, the key factor for Sovereign Grace's faithful longevity will be our doctrinal fidelity. For Sovereign Grace to persevere faithfully, to remain faithful in our mission and fruitful in our labors, we simply must maintain and guard, transfer our biblical convictions, our theological integrity, and as God continues to join us with partners across the globe, our doctrinal consistency across our churches around the world.

There are other vital elements to being a Sovereign Grace Church. Absolutely, our gospel centrality, our gospel values, that culture that the gospel produces (captured in our shaping virtues), our relationships. Praise God for all of these things, but all of these things will be lost or they will be distorted or they will be squandered if they are untethered from our theological convictions. There are so many things happening in Sovereign Grace right now, that just makes your head spin and we're hearing about them this week.

Mexico being the first ecclesiastical nation, the Antioch Project, the National Church Planting Group, RAEs partnering together, polity, sharpening our BCO, youth camps, pastor's college, and a thousand things you are doing in your local churches.

It's all wonderful, but none of it is sufficient to sustain us or to preserve our faithful longevity. All of it must be informed and shaped by and consistent with and anchored to our theology.

That's the burden for this session.

It's not a new one. We've been led this way from the beginning by CJ and some of the gray hairs in this room. In recent years, it's only been strengthened with the formulation of our statement of faith. Not just strengthened, codified as we took the radical countercultural step of becoming audaciously as a family of churches confessional.

That's not stayed, that's not traditional, that's radical. That's remarkable. That's a miracle, is what that is. It's not new, but I believe it's never been more urgent for us. It simply must not be assumed and the landscape is filled with cautionary tales for when it is assumed or, worse, neglected. I think of networks that were once models of vibrancy and influence and mission that downgraded theologically and now they're shells of what they used to be. You can't even find them.

Who would've imagined what has happened in just the past 10 years? As fast as the whole new Calvinism, young, restless, and reformed emerged, it fragmented. Who would've imagined the turmoil in orthodox denominations over issues as fundamental, as biblically explicit as gender and sexuality? They're being ripped apart. It's only accelerating. Here's what we need to discern. It rarely, if ever, occurs all at once. Know this, there's always a process of incremental neglect or compromise.

30 years ago, David Wells, what a man, described this process. The disappearance of theology from the church. This is more relevant today than three decades ago, but listen to what he said.

"The disappearance of which I am speaking is not the same as the abduction of a child who is happily playing at home one minute and then is no longer to be found the next. No one has abducted theology in this sense. The disappearance is closer to what happens in homes where the children are ignored and to all intents and purposes abandoned. They remain in the home, but they have no place in the family. So it is with theology in the church. It remains on the edges of evangelical life, but it has been dislodged from its center."

So prescient.

Well's discernment is just a critical capsule for us to consume our theology remaining on the edges but dislodged from the center. This can happen in a number of different ways.

Just a few categories -

It can happen incrementally. Small compromises. Earlier this year, the bishops of the Church of England — and I have good friends in the Church of England, faithful friends in the Church of England — They announced that while they will not allow clergy to perform same-sex marriages, they will allow them to bless same-sex unions after a civil marriage.

In that same statement, they apologized — they actually repented for homophobic responses in their churches, presupposing but not defining homophobic. They won't perform, but they will bless. Incremental. And the world watches to see what's next.

It can happen incrementally, it can happen through ambiguity.

The same week of that announcement, a video surfaced of a very well-known pastor in Atlanta, Georgia, you would know his name, teaching at a recent conference at his church on homosexuality and Twitter blew up. When you dig down, he did not explicitly affirm homosexuality, but he did speak of Christians who have much to learn from gay men and women who love Jesus. He spoke of one homosexual friend whose faith in God dwarfs his.

"There's not just room in the church for such people," he said, "there's plenty of room for them in the church."

Are they converted? Have they repented?

The most generous interpretation is that it was ambiguous, but recent weeks have removed even some of that ambiguity.

It can happen and often happens through theological minimalism. It's not uncommon for church groupings, church networks to minimize their theological requirements in order to remain together.

I think of one network - many godly people has borne much fruit - but at one point, they lowered their theological standards to two things: The Lausanne Covenant for World Evangelization and their own five theological distinctions. Five. I remember thinking, Lausanne was about uniting Christians worldwide in evangelism. It was never meant to be a confessional statement to govern and discipline a communion of churches.

Networks are able to remain together by minimizing theological distinctives, but it's so shortsighted because if those churches aren't led by pastors with a passion for theological truth and precision weaknesses will inevitably and very soon appear.

We're not superior, but that is not our path because we're convinced. Scripture convinces us. Church history confirms this for us that theological definition strengthens us. It doesn't weaken us. Our goal is not to find out how little we can believe. We want to taste and embrace and teach and exalt in and apply and thrive in the treasure that is the whole council of God as the Lord enables us to understand. Sound doctrine is not constricting, it's liberating, it's clarifying. Theology should excite joy. We should be happy after this message.

Here's the hope and here's the main burden of this message. If by God's grace, we do remain doctrinally faithful, if we do hold fast to the truth of God's word and not just affirm, but treasure it as that which gives life and makes wise and is sweeter than honey and is more precious than gold, and we esteem it and we submit to it, and we allow it to govern and shape us and give us poise and courage that we can expect, not an easy future, not a trouble-free future, but a Christ-exalting future, a joy-sustaining future, a fruit-bearing future because that's what God's word promises.

Now, we've quickly looked at the imperative — actually not too quick — but we looked at the biblical imperative of maintaining our theological integrity. We will look quickly, secondly, at our need for it. In other words, the promise of sound doctrine - what it does for us. I just want to suggest to you a few. These aren't all the normal things one might say, but, **number one, sound doctrine defines our identity.** It reminds us of just who we are. Sound doctrine, think about it, the structures of sound doctrine, they locate us in reality and in history with respect to God and to others. We don't know who we are without sound doctrine.

That's one of the things that was so significant about our new statement of faith, November 10th, 2020, after a season of turmoil and pruning, and in the wake of a thorough reworking of our polity, the elders of our churches, this is what you men did, we planted a definitional flag, both honoring our past and resolving for the future.

This, by the grace of God, is who we are.

It was an act of glad submission to the God who created us, and saves us, and defines us, and exercises his authority over us by his word. That's what confessions do. That's what doctrine does. Doctrine structures our identities, and biblical truth preserves our identities.

David Wells, again,

"Authoritative truth, lies at the heart of Christian life and practice for this is what it means to live under the authority of scripture. It is in this core of confession that the church's identity is preserved across the ages. This is the watchword by which it is known. Without this knowledge informed by the word the church is bereft of what defines the church as the people of God. Bereft of the means of belief and worship and sustenance and proclamation and service."

Brothers, if our doctrine is marginalized or minimized or ceases to function, we won't know who we are. It will be soon that the culture tells us who we are, that the culture defines us. Sovereign Grace will become, at that moment, irrelevant. Worse than irrelevant, a stain on the history of God's faithful warrants. We don't want to be a stain.

This leads to another benefit of theological integrity.

Number two, sound doctrine unifies us.

At the end of the day, it's the only thing that can provide enduring unity. There's much we celebrate and have in common history, which gives rise to common values, even common worship styles, even in ways common ministry methodologies. Nothing binds us together like our doctrine, like our theological commitments.

Here's what's in the process of happening now: As our history fades and our expansion continues, and our ethnic cultural, and geographic diversity increases, the only thing that will be able to unify us is the most important thing - the gospel we cherish and the biblical doctrine we jointly confess and proclaim.

A third benefit so vital to our future. When it is functioning, **sound doctrine protects us**. Our concern for theological integrity is not just to be right. We're not trying to congratulate ourselves on our doctrinal superiority. Nonsense. Errors in false doctrine is the opposite of what Paul calls seven times in the pastorals, healthy or sound doctrine. It is destructive.

You can never think wrongly about God without consequence. No matter how sincere you are, you can never think about God wrongly without consequence. Theological definition protects us. It guards our boundaries from the incursions of culture and all around us.

It's just warfare.

The orthodoxies of our respective cultures are competing for the minds of our people. It's like a battle ram just smashing against the souls of our people. We need walls. We need immovable truth that repel those assaults. We need clarity and certainty and a rock to stand on, the discernment, that truth wielded independence upon the spirit provides.

Another point here, it's not just error that sound doctrine protects us against, clear doctrinal formulations like our statement of faith, they highlight what's most important. They keep us from drifting into secondary or trivial concerns.

I rented a car this week. I got an upgrade. I drive older cars. This car has so many gadgets, I don't even know what they do. It's dangerous for me to drive this car, but as I was pulling out of the airport, I was reminded of something that I'd learned. You start to drift from the lane and all of a sudden the car jerks back in the center. It's like, "There's something wrong with this car."

Welcome to lane-assist technology. If you drift, it jerks you back. That's what sound doctrine does. If we drift, no, it jerks us back to the center. Keeps us focused on what's most important, keeps us focused on what is preeminent. Keeps us focused on what saves and sanctifies and gives joy.

Carl Trueman comments on this exact same idea. He says this,

"A church with a creed or a confession has a built-in gospel reality check. It is unlikely to become sidetracked by the peripheral issues of the passing moment. Rather, it will focus instead on the great theological categories that touch on matters of eternal significance."

Who cares what Barbie the movie has to teach us? I'm sorry, number four. It's not in my notes. [laughter]

Sound doctrine nourishes our souls. This is another sermon and every one of you have already preached this sermon. Just remember this, we're not talking — and I hope for our guests, I hope you realize we're not just sitting here going, "We want to be the smart guys. We want to be pure." No, sound doctrine is not simply conceptual. It's combustible. It generates faith and provokes conviction and dissipates doubts and heals wounds and produces affections and strengthens resolve. It keeps us from throwing in the towel.

That's why Paul is so adamant that pastors teach and transfer and urge upon people doctrine. Everything depends on it, lives and marriages and parenting

and relationships and worship. They're all informed and shaped and strengthened by sound doctrine.

Our people in our churches, they are going to thrive to the extent that they inhabit the Bible's world. In other words, to the extent that they live within the doctrinal framework that scripture shapes for us. What a beautiful world we get to live in - The truth of God's word.

Number five, sound doctrine guides and fuels our worship. Bob, thank you for your leadership. We're not just emoting up here. We're not just pursuing experiences. Theology makes sure we are worshiping the right God in the right way.

Number six, sound doctrine shapes and sustains and protects our mission. I won't expand on this point except to say, if our doctrine doesn't ground and govern our mission, prioritizing the supremacy of Christ and the transforming power of the gospel and the formation and strengthening of disciples into local churches under the teaching of God's word, our mission will change.

This is one reason, historically, that mission departments have sometimes been the back door to heresy in seminaries.

Why? Not for a lack of sincerity, but because so much focus is on the target, the target audience. Issues of cultural anthropology and linguistics and so forth. All of that is important, but so much focus is on the target that what is transferred — so in order to reach that target — what is transferred begins to change. Without sound doctrine, we'll lose our mission.

Finally, number seven and supremely sound doctrine and only sound doctrine preserves the gospel.

Here is a burden I have long carried in this regard and it has to do with something precious to us. Stay with me just a moment. Our gospel centrality, it's not just a shared value, is it? It's in our DNA. It's helped make us who we are. We love it. We want to stay there, but for all its biblical currency and its hermeneutical importance, again, we never want to lose it, but remaining merely gospel-centered will not preserve us.

If you answered that original question, "Hold onto the gospel," you were wrong. Maintaining gospel centrality by itself will not preserve us. What will preserve us is, by the grace of God, what lies under the gospel, biblical authority and theological integrity. What will sustain us is what defines the

gospel and gives shape to the gospel and the realities that make sense of the gospel.

We don't just say "gospel", we have in mind a particular kind of God. We have in mind the setting of created reality. We have in mind the nature of man created in the image of God but fallen. Because of that fall, he has a particular predicament. We have in mind a particular way of receiving the gospel. We have in mind an understanding of the effects of the gospel, the life implications of the gospel.

If you lose those things, you lose everything that defines the gospel. Then you're left reconfiguring the gospel. That's the lesson of Christian liberalism. That's the lesson of the social gospel movement. The social gospel. Listen to the word, social gospel. It was gospel-centered but drained of scriptural authority, drained of a supernatural worldview, drained of theological orthodoxy, it became a different gospel. In our cultural moment, there's no shortage of fresh examples even in evangelicalism. Quick to affirm the gospel, oh yes, for the gospel, but rejecting doctrines that make sense of the gospel, dismissing the ethical entailments of the gospel, resulting in a false gospel with no power to save.

Here's our hope: with the truth of God's word, with sound doctrine, with a biblical vision of a sovereign God and a mighty savior, and a sin-atonement cross and a glorious gospel that is the power of salvation for all who believe, an arisen Christ who will build His church, we have everything necessary for faithful ministry. Our mission will be sustained and protected and fueled and fruitful. We can, by God's grace, experience faithful longevity as we watch our doctrine.

Part of watching it, brothers, part of our doctrinal fidelity is not merely affirming the truth of God's word but also its value. Not just declaring it but delighting in it.

Let's do that. Let's resolve day by day in season and out to taste and treasure and exult in and draw strength from and bank our lives and our ministries and our partnership on the truth of God's word and the gospel that it reveals.

Ultimately, this is not about our theological stability. It's not about prolonging Sovereign Grace. This is ultimately about pleasing God and bringing glory to our savior.

Over the long term, 15 years, 30 years, 50 years, beyond, I believe that together we will bring Him the most glory and bear the most fruit, not by

planting the most churches, not by entering the most countries, not by publishing the most materials, not by training the most pastors, not by having the largest conferences, but through our faithfulness to God's word and the doctrine it delivers, and the gospel it proclaims, and above all the Christ it magnifies.

Let's pray.

Lord, we tremble, that we have been entrusted with such a treasure. Truth, abiding truth, eternal truth, that gives life and transforms lives and brings you to us, through which Christ shines what you've given us, this truth. As pastors, you give us the consummate privilege of giving ourselves to teach, to lead with it, to be governed by it, to be protected with it, to set it loose among your people. We ask, I ask, that you would grant us faithful longevity by holding to and treasuring and proclaiming your truth in the Christ who shines from it for your glory. In Jesus name, amen.