

Jason Upchurch - James 1:19-21 - Die, Divide, Debate, Decide - Part 2

Last week we took a little pause from working through 1 Corinthians to stop and talk about how we think through the importance of different doctrines. The word doctrine - or even the word theology - is just what the Bible teaches about something. That's all it means.

Angelology is the doctrine of angels, or the theology of angels. It's just what the Bible teaches about angels. Hamartiology is the doctrine of sin. Hamartias in Greek means sin. So what the Bible teaches about sin is called hamartiology. Christology is what the Bible teaches about what? Christ. Any time you ask "what does the Bible teach about something" you're doing theology.

Now, which do you think is more important for us to get correct: angelology or Christology? Christology. Our understanding of who Jesus is and what he's done is way more important than our understanding of angels. We probably know that, but it's helpful for us to think through why that is.

Paul says in **1 Cor. 15:3** that he delivered to the Corinthians as first importance - primary importance - that Jesus rose from the dead. That's essential to the gospel message. If you remove the resurrection, you destroy the gospel.

Side: If you take any issue too far, you can destroy the gospel. So maybe angels aren't as important as Christ, unless you think Jesus is an angel like the Mormons do. Or you think we should worship angels or you think we become an angel when we die. We have to use a little discernment even as we decide how important something is.

Okay, last week I mentioned the 4 categories listed on this chart as a way to categorize the importance of different doctrines. I didn't make these categories, but I think they're helpful. Let me give you a quick recap:

There are doctrines to die for. These are usually very clear in Scripture and very important. These are issues like the Trinity, salvation by faith alone in grace alone in the Lord Jesus alone, that the 66 books of the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, that Jesus is fully man and fully God - 2 natures in 1 person, born of a virgin, sinless who rose from the grave.

They are to die for because the Bible says these things must be believed in order to be saved. **Or** the Bible says that to deny these things is to deny the faith. So we take our cues from the Bible.

The second grouping is to divide for. These are issues where genuine believers can disagree but the disagreements are substantial enough that it usually makes sense for us to worship in different churches. I think this should be as minimal as possible, but nevertheless sometimes it seems helpful.

So those who baptize professing believers and those who baptize infants usually find it hard to do church together. Those who are committed to speaking in tongues in the congregation and those who believe that gift has ceased usually have a hard time doing church together. Same with women in leadership at churches.

When you look at a church's doctrinal statement, usually what's included are both die for and divide for issues. They're not saying everything in their doctrinal statement is die for. A church is trying to explain what you can expect from them as a church.

The church that bought our old chairs is a Cowboy Church. I asked the guy what a Cowboy Church was. And he said they preach the Word, not everybody is a cowboy but he does wear a cowboy hat when he preaches except when he prophesies, then he takes his hat off. They're charismatic cowboys!

Cowboy culture is a feature of theirs. And because of that they attract cowboys and bikers and all kinds of folks who have never heard the gospel before. It seems odd, but God seems to be bringing people to himself through that ministry.

Something to understand is people put different issues into different categories. Not everyone agrees with which category we put something into. Maybe you think some issues we should just debate about where where I think we divide over them. Or vice versa.

Some would say spiritual gifts are divide issues - they're that important. As a church we put them in debate or even decide level.

Others elevate "decide for" issues into the divide category. Issues of end times, or the relationship between Israel and the Church, type of music, version of the Bible. Usually KJV-only people don't just prefer the KJV, they divide.

Not everyone agrees where these lines should be drawn. We want to be charitable, but also wise. We don't want to separate from everybody - that's old school fundamentalism that becomes a legalistic train wreck. At the same time we want to ensure that there are some things we need to consider carefully so as not to compromise the Word of God.

Okay, this morning we're looking at the bottom two categories. These are things to debate over and things to simply decide on. What we're talking about here are intramural discussions within our own church.

I was talking to Dave this last week and he mentioned these 2 buckets should be huge compared to the other two. I agree. There's really nothing within a church that should be off limits to talk about and openly discuss with a heart of humility.

I want you to know that any question you have is fair game. That's true with me and Andy. And it's our desire that everyone would have that same attitude where we can talk peaceably about anything.

You want to talk about the age of the earth, woke theology, views on marriage and divorce. Maybe you're struggling with doubts about what the Bible has to say about something or even if God is real. Maybe you think a song we sing is heretical or a book we promote is unhelpful. It should all be on the table for reasonable discussion.

With that, let's talk about the last 2 buckets, as it were, of where we would place issues. We're going to look at the next 2 buckets: debate about and decide on.

3) Issues to Debate About.

And I think this should be by far the largest bucket. These are things that we maybe disagree with the person sitting next to us about, but we can still fellowship together.

They're not related to salvation, they're not so significant that it might be better for us to be at a different church, but they are important enough to spend time and energy talking and effort understanding what the Bible says.

Now, the word debate has a very negative connotation but I don't think it needs to have that. I think we should be able to have lively, robust, good hearted conversations with each other knowing that we love each other and accept each other. That feels a little koombaya-ish, but that's not always bad.

Maybe we could have used the word "discuss" or something. But as the family of God at RBC, we should be able to sit down and have a conversation with our Bibles open and rigorously discuss Scripture in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord. That if Jesus was physically with us at the table as we debate he wouldn't be glaring at us, or telling us to get behind him Satan. If he were sitting with us he'd enjoy the conversation.

I saw a quote recently that said, "You should be a delight to disagree with." I think that's actually a great quote. People should want to come to you and talk about difficult issues because even if you disagree with them they know you will be filled with charity and grace and kindness and gentleness because you are filled with the Holy Spirit.

If you're a bulldog when you discuss things, it's not a work of the Spirit in you. "I'm defending the truth!" No you're just being a jerk.

Gal. 5:19 says the works of the flesh are enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions.

2 Tim. 2:24: The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome - quarreling is angry arguing - but kind to everyone, able to teach patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

Paul's actually talking about how we talk to unbelievers. Well, how much more gracious should we be with our brothers and sisters in Christ?

So I'll give you a list of things in a little bit of things I'd put in the debate bucket. But what I really want to talk about is our **attitude** toward each other in debating. Because this is crucial as we worship together. **Read James 1:19-21**

No matter what we're talking about, this is should be our posture in all circumstances. Every one of us should be quick to hear. That means our primary goal in communication is to understand the other person clearly. That's the most important thing.

Prov. 18:2: A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

You ever talk to someone and you realize they're just not interested in actually trying to understand what you have to say? What they're really doing is waiting for you to pause so they can pounce on you? Yeah, don't be that guy. That guy is fool.

Whether it's talking to you boss or your coworker or your wife or the person sitting next to you, your aim should be to understand them. To be quick to hear. And that's hard.

And it's hard when we're discussing issues of the Bible as well. Because we've got a lot of opinions and ideas. But we should be quick to listen to other people and understand them well.

James says we should also be slow to speak. Maybe you're really, really passionate about Christians not celebrating Halloween because that's compromise and association with the devil. Or maybe you just think Christians have no business drinking alcohol or the public school system is a travesty. And you're really passionate.

I once was talking to a Christian lady who was telling me that sending kids to public school is like sending them to the Temple of Moloch. It's a pagan place where they indoctrinate people. Which I found really odd because her Christian husband was a public school teacher. Was he a pagan high priest? Or was he salt and light in a dark institution?

We need to be slow to speak. And I'm not saying compromise or be ashamed. I'm saying we need to carefully consider how we can be the most helpful in respond in a situation.

Eph. 4:29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Does your speech give out grace? Does it always build up? How about when you're talking about other Christians or difficult doctrines?

James says we need to be slow to anger. There's a lot of topics that irritate us. There's a lot of things people say that bother us or drive us nuts. But that anger has nothing to do with righteousness. "But there's righteous anger." Yes there is, but we can probably count on one hand the times our anger could actually be classified as righteous.

And I love what he says here in **Vs. 21**: receive with meekness the implanted word. He's saying receive with humility and grace the things God has said in his Word.

The implanted Word is probably the gospel message. But even more than that, it's all of the Word of God that now guides our lives.

Moo: "believers [are] to allow the word to influence them in all parts of their lives...we need to be open and receptive to the work of the word in the heart..." (Moo, PNTC note on 1:21)

When we're having these friendly debates about doctrine, one of the reasons we get worked up is that we just don't want to accept what God's Word says. We want to fight against it, make exceptions to it, justify that "it can't mean that." Or maybe it does and we just don't want it to because then we might need to change some things.

I've seen people get really worked up about tithing. "The NT never says to tithe!" You're right. That's OT. The NT says we are to be exceedingly more generous now that we're filled with the Spirit.

Ladies often get very worked up about the Bible's command to dress modestly. And push against the reality that God commands our clothes to please him. Men get worked up too. Summer is coming: what's your theology of modesty? Do you rejoice that God wants us to be modest and show a lot less skin and tightness than the world says is normal? Or does that irritate you? Do you feel judged when you hear that word. Why? It might be that you're resisting God's Word.

I've had people blow up at me over the doctrine of predestination. "If God chooses people then he's a moral monster who sends billions of people to hell."

Jesus says: You did not choose me, but what? I chose you.

Tit. 1:1: Paul says he is an apostle of Jesus Christ for the sake of the faith of God's elect. Paul preaches the gospel because God has chosen people out there to be saved and the only way they'll hear is for him to go preach. He's preaching for the ones God chose.

Do you humbly rejoice in what the Bible says about election and predestination? Do you rejoice in this implanted word even though it's hard to accept? Or does that grind on you?

Turn to Tit. 3:9-11 This is a good passage because what we find out is that there are issues that we should not debate. But more important we need to check our attitude. **Read**

Let me start with **Vss. 10-11**. A person who stirs up division is a cancer in the church. So much so that actually the Matt. 18 process of church discipline is fast-tracked.

If there's a divisive person - someone who loves to argue and is always causing problems - they are warned once, then twice, then disciplined out of the church. Usually church discipline is a 4 step process. Here's it's a two step process. Jesus came to create unity in the church not division. **Read**

So if you're going into a debate just to cause division that's a problem. There are some people who just love controversy. They love their pet doctrine and become divisive when anyone disagrees with them. This is a warning against that kind of attitude.

There's a difference between gently discussing a hard subject with the purpose of understanding the Bible, allowing yourself to be challenged and bulldogging people.

When Jodee and I lived in Kentucky we visited a church that put on their bulletin "You cannot talk about Calvinism at this church because it breeds division." That's really sad. Calvinism relates to someone's understanding of predestination. Apparently you could be a Calvinist, but couldn't talk about it at that church

because it was too divisive. That's really bad form. What that means is they have a bunch of immature nerds who start arguing every time they talk about their pet doctrine.

That's not us. I don't like the baggage that comes with the label Calvinist, but I'm basically a Calvinist. But that should not be an off-limits conversation. Really, what that church should have done is removed the people who were divisive.

That's the bigger issue.

So what issues land in this category? It's hard to list them all because remember I said this should be the biggest bucket. We should want to come to church and talk to our fellow believers about the things we've read through the week and be able to debate or discuss or engage in conversation knowing we'll be able to have friendly and fruitful discussions to the glory of God and for our sanctification.

So here are some:

Predestination - maybe you're a committed Calvinist or an Arminian or not sure. We should be able to discuss this peaceably.

Eschatology - you wanna talk about the rapture or amillennialism or preterism. Maybe you're getting rid of your Left Behind books or maybe you've got end times charts everywhere. That's fair game.

If we're to set our hope fully on the grace to be revealed at the coming of the Lord Jesus, we should probably know what to expect at his coming. I'm not sure we can ever be 100% certain, but I think we can know a lot more than what most people think. I'll tell you eschatology affects your attitude toward the world around you. We can talk about that here.

Age of the universe | Spiritual gifts | head coverings | views on divorce and remarriage | suicide | euthanasia | tattoos | gambling | drinking alcohol | can I lose my salvation | in vitro fertilization | extent of the atonement | which version of the Bible is best | abortion | sexuality | Christmas trees | Halloween | patriotism | how many kids to have

The issues in this bucket are usually half about some aspect of theology and the other half are about how we live our lives - Christian ethics. The theology questions can have an impact on our life, but not usually.

The ethical questions are the ones where the rubber meets the road in our lives. Our view of divorce and remarriage is going to affect how we counsel the person sitting next to us having a rough go. Our view of tattoos is going to impact what we look like long term.

But all of these issues - and of course a whole bunch more - we should be able to discuss peaceably with our Bibles open.

4) Issues to decide on.

Issues to decide on are the lowest level of importance. And these are on the lowest level for a few reasons.

First, like I mentioned last week, there are some people who make this the biggest bucket because they just don't want to do the hard work of understanding the Scripture. Some of the issues I mentioned up in "debate" they want to put in decide.

Does eschatology really matter? Does our view on the extent of the atonement really matter? I mean, marriages are struggling, just raising kids and handling the finances is tough enough. Do I really need to spend time reading a 4 views book on the warning passages in Hebrews?

Those are important considerations, but let me just say again: many times we're just lazy. We put things into the "decide on" bucket because we don't want to actually study. We don't want to pick up our Bible or a book and do the hard work of seeing what God says.

Side: If you're stuck not reading your Bible, go research a topic you really want to know more on. The times where I can't put my Bible down in life are those times when I was studying something I really didn't know much about. It was good and exciting. There's really cool Bible study tools that can help you do that.

A second reason a topic might be in this bucket is that maybe Scripture really just isn't clear on an issue. We could debate all day long about what a "Word of Knowledge" is or a "Word of Wisdom" - but there's just not a lot of data to go with.

There's several really good theories about who the sons of God are in Genesis 6. But does it really affect much theologically or how I live as a Christian? Not really. I think we should be diligent to know as much as we can, but there are limits.

These are issues where we just shrug our shoulders and say "I wish we had more information, but we don't."

Here's a third reason: The issue is inherently divisive. **Read 9-11**

Paul gives us a list of things that are to be avoided.

Foolish controversies. Paul is probably talking about the manner in which people disagree, but still there are issues that often bring way more heat than light. You ever talk to someone about Bible passage or a topic and they just explode? Yeah, it's best not to keep discussing that. You need to step back and address some other issues first.

Genealogies. The Jews were very focused on genealogies. The OT is filled with them. The NT has 2 and both relate to Jesus. We don't know exactly what the issue here was, but there's not a lot that can be gleaned from genealogies. To become dogmatic or divisive over them is to stir up division.

The bigger issue is that some people make mountains out of molehills.

Quarrels about the Law. Especially in the OT there's a lot of nitty gritty stuff that's often hard to understand. And more than that hard to understand how we apply is as NC believers.

Most of us have been around people who make really big deals about really small things in the Bible. When I was at Bible college I had a buddy and we'd talk about random issues in Scripture that were really odd. We called it our little corner of heresy. Not because it actually heretical, but because we had friendly speculation about really random topics. But it was friendly and cordial.

Again, some people will disagree what topics go in this bucket:

Version of the Bible | hymns or contemporary songs | raise your hands while singing

Many of the issues people put in the debate category, others put into this category. These are the issues of least concern and least impact and therefore we should not hold tightly to them.

I can think of no better place to end this than in **Titus 3:1-2. Read**

We should be gentle and show perfect courtesy. Why? The gospel. **Read 3-8**

The fruit of people who are saved by the grace of Jesus is that we know which issues are die for, which issues we divide over, debate about and decide on. And we do all of these in gentleness and grace to the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Pray