

Body Matters

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2 Timothy 3:1-9

Sermon Series:
Kingdom Legacy

*“To avoid
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nothing, say
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nothing.”*

- Elbert Hubbard

Last Sunday, I said there is a controversy brewing in the PC(USA). The debate centers on whether practicing gay and lesbian people should be ordained to the office of Deacon, Elder or Minister of Word and Sacrament in the church. Currently, membership is open to anyone who professes Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, while ordination is restricted to people who practice fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. The liberal wing of the PC(USA) presses to eliminate this restriction

When I began my sermon this way last Sunday, it was as if all the air was sucked out of the room. It became uncommonly quiet. You could almost hear people breathing. I'm noticing that same level of quiet this morning. I was unprepared for the stillness at last Sunday's early service. It knocked me off stride. I realized in that moment how delicate it is to preach on deeply personal topics.

I have a weak stomach for controversy. I have a visceral aversion to controversy. My forte is building consensus among people. But sometimes controversy cannot be avoided. American writer and philosopher Elbert Hubbard had this to say about avoiding criticism: “To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.”

Some of you really care about denominational issues. Others of you couldn't care less. Yet human sexuality impacts all of us! While the presenting issue addresses who is suitable for ordination, the deeper issue involves proclaiming Jesus as Lord and committing to Scripture as our authority in all matters related to human sexuality. What the Bible says about our bodies makes a claim on everyone here today who professes allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Last Sunday, we looked at how early Christians dealt with their differences, using Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul urges Timothy to avoid “wrangling over words” (2:14), “profane chatter” (2:16) and becoming quarrelsome (2:24). Paul calls us to civility, which is the ability to disagree without becoming disagreeable. We'll never make headway on controversial social issues if we don't practice civility with each other.

Now that we have set the stage for how these early believers dealt with their differences, let's move on to the differences themselves. I'm convinced the major heresy that lies behind this and every other letter of Paul is making an enormous comeback. I'll leave the question of whether there is such a thing as heresy anymore for another day.

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Verses 2-4 contain a list of 19 vices that characterize these false teachers. The list begins with “lovers of self” (3:1) and ends with “lovers of pleasure” (3:4). These false teachers feign love for God. In actuality, narcissism would more accurately describe their disposition.

Verse 5 provides a handy summary of this vice list. These false teachers manifest an outward form of godliness but deny its inner power. They practice a counterfeit spirituality (verse 8).

Counterfeit money is big business in America today. U.S. companies lose 250 billion dollars every year in counterfeit costs. The Bureau of Printing and Engraving is constantly working to insure our currency is recognizable from forgeries. Portraits on real money appear lifelike and stand out from the background; counterfeit portraits look lifeless and flat. Portraits on real money display a ghost-like image when held to the light; fake bills do not. Real money has a linen and cotton texture; counterfeit money feels like paper. The edges on Federal Reserve and Treasury seals are sharp and well defined; the edges on fake bills are often dull and blurred. Genuine currency has blue and red fibers embedded throughout; fibers in counterfeit money appear on the surface.

Paul accuses these false teachers of counterfeiting Christianity. They have a form of godliness, they even use the same words, but they lack God’s transforming power.

We identify counterfeit money by studying real money, just as we can study counterfeit Christianity by studying real Christianity. Jesus said a tree is judged by its fruit. What are the fruits of these false teachers? True teachers have moral qualities embedded into the very fabric of their lives, while false teachers have only a surface level of integrity.

Before we leave this passage, an explanation of verses 6-7 may be in order. These false teachers have wormed their way into households to captivate weak-willed or alternatively silly women. What’s up with that? Paul is not implying all women are weak-willed. Since first century women had little access to formal education, they were ill-equipped to counter the distorted message of these false teachers. They remind me of zealous telemarketers who take advantage of unsuspecting senior citizens.

These false teachers resemble an early form of Gnosticism, which comes to prominence in the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. Gnostic originates from the Greek word for knowledge (gnosis). Gnostics claim access to a higher esoteric form of knowledge. They pride themselves as being people “in the know.”

Gnostics believe the spirit and soul of a person are good, while the body is evil. People are essentially divine souls trapped in material bodies. Salvation occurs when the divine soul is able to escape the human body.

In keeping with this unbiblical dualism, Gnostics believe the divine Christ joins the human Jesus at baptism and leaves before his

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death. They reject Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead. They claim Jesus' resurrection is spiritual and allegorical, not physical and literal (2:18).

This Gnostic bifurcation of a divine soul and evil body leads to two opposite and equally disastrous conclusions about the body. One group of Gnostics practiced a rigid asceticism of the body. Since the body is sinful, it should be treated harshly. That's why some Gnostics forbade marriage and abstinence from certain foods (1 Timothy 4:3).

Paradoxically, this unbiblical dualism also led Gnostics to adopt a libertine attitude about the body. Since the body is evil and will not survive into the next life, you can pretty much do anything you want with it.

You can guess which branch of Gnosticism is making a comeback today. It's the "you-can-do-anything-you-want-with-your-body" type of Gnosticism. The soul of a person really matters to God. The body is, well, immaterial. Sex is just a matter of hormones and fun. It's no big deal. Go ahead and indulge the appetites of your body. It's just sex!

Orthodox Christianity takes an opposing view. The Bible claims our bodies matter to God. Scripture affirms the essential goodness of creation. We are not disembodied spirits. God created us body and soul together.

Jesus was born in a body. He took on flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus died in his body. The Apostle's Creed offers a rebuttal to

Gnosticism. Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." Jesus was raised in a body. We do not believe in the immortality of the soul, we affirm the resurrection of the body.

What we do with our bodies matters to God. In the Genesis account, God created us male and female in His image. At the end of the day, God pronounces them good. In Genesis 2, God fashions Adam and Eve with bodies and blesses their marital union. They are naked and not ashamed. Their sexual union serves as a life-uniting act to correspond to their life-uniting commitment. There is no such thing in the Bible as casual sex!

One doesn't have to be married to bear God's image with someone else. We can be single and express God's image in community with one another. If Genesis identifies God's intention for humanity to live as men and women in community and men and women in marriage, then it's also God's intention for ordained leaders to live this way in the church.

I do not speak these words dispassionately. I feel for gay people and those who have family members who are gay. I know this is agonizing for some of you. This sermon is not targeted at gay people. Given the sexual disposition of most of the people here today, it's far more germane to challenge heterosexual people to live in fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness.

I feel for those who are confused about their sexuality. There is so much sexual confusion and

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brokenness in our culture. I not only see the glossy side of people, I encounter the dark side also.

I feel for single people, especially single young adults, who are bombarded with confusing messages from our sex-obsessed culture.

This is not a message you'll hear very often in our sex-saturated, intimacy-deprived culture. Yet, God has not called the church to mimic our secular culture. God wants to offer in the church a genuine alternative.

The church has lost home field advantage in the 21st century. Actually, the church has been losing market shares since the second half of the 20th century. Perhaps this development isn't so bad after all. We may have accommodated ourselves too much to our culture in an earlier day. Few people count the terrible cost of the misuse of sexuality these days. As our culture becomes increasingly permissive (and I don't see the pendulum swinging back any time soon), it's going to be increasingly unconventional and counter-cultural for us to live as disciples of Jesus.