

## Handling Words

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*For a church to be bound together, it's critical to know what pulls it apart.* Paul turns a corner from talking about what unites the church, the gospel, to what divides the church: *quarreling about words*. There's a lot of that today. So if quarreling about words divides the church does that mean stay away from *controversy*? Isn't Paul wading into controversy here? Then what's the problem with quarreling about words? And if we shouldn't fight about words, does that mean accept the Bible no questions asked? *Fighting words, Divine words, Assuring words.*

### Fighting Words

In our first few years of marriage, my wife and I got into these awful arguments that lasted hours. They would go round and round. That hurt me. I'm hurt that you would say that. I didn't even say that. Yes you did. Until my wife would eventually say, I don't even know what we're talking about anymore! There's a kind of quarrel that loses track of what's important, loses the forest for the trees. Paul coins a term for it: ***word-fighting***. The debates have become so myopic they've lost focus on what's important, the bigger picture of what God is up to. It's what H&P do in 17-18. They grab onto a set of words, and insist on them to such a degree, they swerve away from the truth, the gospel. And they're important words about the bodily resurrection of the saints, words that appear in Scripture, but they've made them fighting words, divisive words. Have you made important words divisive words? Are you clinging to important truths so tightly you're veering from *the truth*? Paul says, **Remind them of these things (the gospel), and charge them before God *not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers* (14).** That's a pastor's job. Now if we're to avoid obsessing about words, does that mean we shouldn't study the meaning of biblical words? Look them up in dictionaries, concordances, consult commentaries? Not at all. But *that* kind of attention, NTW says, is *essentially humble; it's open to being taught*. Entirely different from tenacious word battles. But there's plenty of room for humble, open to being taught discussion. How should we go about those discussions? From time to time I receive critiques on things I've written or said. And each time I try to listen carefully to see if there's anything I can learn. Look for *the kernel of truth*.

Sometimes that's hard. I don't always succeed. But I take serious critiques to our elders for input: *the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness* (24–25). This is instructive for all of us. Pastor Tim Shorey says we should even assume we're wrong: *in opinion, attitude, word choice, emphasis, tone, grasp of the information, or timing*. Assume you're wrong. Be kind not quarrelsome, look for a kernel of truth, be patient with evil. Next we're told Hymenaeus and Philetus swerved from the truth *into irreverent* babble. What's that? *Holding your words in higher than God's word*. It's revering your own take, like a critics' obsession with a single word or like me esteeming my feelings in marital conflict. *Revering our words more than God's words*. Sometimes a critique will get hung up on a single word, disregard the context in which it was communicated, lose the whole point. The critic fails to realize they're revering their words over God's words. They're may not realize they walk into a sermon, open up a book, read a post *not essentially humble but fundamentally proud*. Not thinking where am I wrong, not looking for the kernel of truth. H&P thought *they we right!* But here's the thing: irreverent babble *leads people into more and more ungodliness* (16). Irreverent babble has moral implications. Getting angry with those who won't agree; gossiping about those who disagree; leaving the church. We lose the big picture of God's love for all because of our spec of insight. Paul says, this is *dangerous*. Irreverent babble advances, spreads like gangrene. The image is of sheep set out to pasture. Irreverent, self-regarding arguments set loose to infect and devour the sheep. This is particular temptation for modern people because pre-modern people revered the community, honored the elders (sometimes to a fault), but modern people revere themselves *at the expense of the community*: their take, their feelings; their experience *ultimate*, upsetting the faith of some; word is *destroys*. Nobody thinks of themselves like this. At the time you think you're right, faithful. But after the division we can look back and say of course it was wrong; they missed the forest for the trees. *It's easier to be wise after the event; but Paul is writing this to make us wise to it now*. So, if you're fighting about words; if you're quick to critique, stop. If you're *entertaining* angry words, gossip, stop. Paul says *avoid* it: a command to turn around and walk away, for the love of the church.

## Divine Words

Now, it's not enough to avoid fighting words. We need to be attentive to divine words: *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth* (15). Two things here. First, how we **present ourselves**. Second, how we handle the truth. How are we to present ourselves? As an approved worker of God's word. This is someone who can stand up in God's presence unashamed of how they've handled his word. Now, you might say isn't that just for pastors, for Timothy? But Paul tells Timothy to show himself an example to all (1 Tm 4:12). So while there is an emphasis on how leaders present themselves, this goes for all of us. He says, "Do your best." the word means be *zealously observant*. Are you zealous about how the Word of God is handled, about how you handle it? People are more zealous about a church's kids program, community that's convenient, sermons that address felt needs. But when I stand before God to give an account, he won't ask about those things. He'll want to know if we were zealously observant of his words. How do we do that? By **handling it rightly**. The word means "to cut straight." When you cut a board straight you cut it *correctly*. We had a carpenter build a mantle for us, and one day when I was inspecting it I noticed a gap between the mantle and the wall. Assuming the board hadn't be cut correctly, I pointed it out. And he said, the wall is crooked. I thought he was joking, but then he explained how he always cuts boards straight but walls are often uneven. A good interpreter strives to cut the word straight, which often exposes gaps in our lives. How do we cut the word straight? We teach a whole class on this, and lots of good books like *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, but the simplest answer is: *strive to honor the author's intent*. What was Jesus, Paul, trying to say? We often come to a text with our own expectations. I want to be encouraged, so we distort a convicting psalm into a warm fuzzy text. Or we come with our own cultural assumptions about how gender, authority, church should work. So instead of honoring the author's intention, reading the intended meaning out of the text; we read our own biased, meaning into the text. We disrespect the author because we respect ourselves more. We regard our words and wants as more than God's words and wants. We lift the creature above the Creator. And that leaves us misaligned with God, gaps in our character. Instead, strive to cut it straight. Work with the Bible until the truth comes out. Honor the author's intent. And plead for spiritual insight, ask the Spirit to deconstruct your agendas, expose

your blind spots, sanctify your shortsightedness. If you hold the word of truth in high regard, don't be surprised if God disagrees with you. This is *transformational* work.

### **Assuring Words**

*Fighting words*: irreverent, ungodly. *Divine words*: zealously observant, cut them straight. Finally, *assuring words*. Will the church survive all this? Faith being destroyed? 19: **God's firm foundation stands**. This could refer to the gospel, but it is more likely the church, since Paul says, the Lord knows those who are his. The firm foundation of the Church *stands*. It's in a tense that means it stood in the past and will continue to stand in the future. How? It bears a seal, an inscription by the builder, which provides two reasons the Church will stand. First, **the Lord knows those who are his**. The quotation comes from Moses when confronted by 250 rebellious leaders who are judged by God. Talk about his worst day in ministry. Instead of firing back at them, he falls on this face and says, the Lord knows who are his. Talk about humility. Come what may, the Lord knows who belongs to him, not in cold calculating omniscience but intimate, personal, rescuing knowledge. The Lord *knows* those who are his. In Numbers he even says, *God will bring them to him*. An intimate, drawing knowledge. Now, how do you know if you're part of that group? **Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.**" To name the name of the Lord was to identify with him, to give up the idea that you belonged to your community, or we belong to ourselves, and *to recognize we belong to the Lord!* You're his. Now revere and obey his words in place of your own. Take his name and live like it. You see, the church rests on the foundation beneath the foundation; on God knowing us not us knowing him. And that people, the Church, is joined to Christ the cornerstone. That's why it stands, *forever*. The church is eternally cemented to Christ.