

# What To Look For In A Church: Right Doctrine

## Introduction

Good evening. Once again we continue our study on What To Look For In A Church, and tonight we're going to look at the second part: Right Doctrine. Now, last week we saw that the first marker of a healthy church is Right Leadership, where a church is led by godly, gifted men who are committed to shepherding the flock as examples to the rest of the congregation. Tonight, we're going to cover the necessity of Right Doctrine, and next week, Lord willing, we'll look at the Right Practice of a church, or what a church does and should look like in its corporate life.

You can turn with me to 1 Timothy 4, but as we study our passage tonight I want to say a few remarks at the outset about doctrine in general. First, the word "doctrine" is the English-ization of the Greek word *didasko*. It means, simply, "teaching". So when we talk about Bible doctrine, all we mean is simply what does the Bible teach about a particular subject.

For example, we can talk about The Doctrine of Justification By Faith, which refers to the Bible's teaching about how a sinner is made righteous before a Holy God. We can talk about the Doctrine of Total Depravity, which means the Bible's teaching about man's sin nature and its effects. You've heard of the Doctrine of Election, which means the Bible's teaching on God's sovereign choice to save a people for Himself.

So the idea of "doctrine" isn't really some elite, academic concept that you need a PhD to understand. Whenever you hear someone talking about "doctrine", just know that all they mean is "what the Bible teaches". Now, some doctrines are more difficult to understand that particular doctrine; Peter says as much as the end of 2 Peter, where he refers to Paul's letters as Scripture and says that some of the things Paul writes are hard to understand. But the general concept of what doctrine is isn't hard to grasp: it simply means "teaching".

Now, throughout church history there have been various battles the church has fought when a particular doctrine has come under assault. In the early church, the Doctrine of the Trinity was threatened by Arius. Then, following that, the Doctrine of God's Sovereignty was maligned by Pelagius. The Reformation revolved around the Doctrines of Sola Scriptura and Sola Fide: Scripture Alone and Faith Alone, the Doctrine of Justification by Faith. So there has been really a constant assault on various fronts throughout the ebb and flow of history as Christ has built His Church.

But as far as I can tell, there has never been a time throughout the last 2,000 years like today. Today, doctrine is under assault like never before. On virtually every front, there is some naysayer that is either trying to tear down long-standing, apostolic truth, or some whacko that is claiming to have received new revelation that supercedes millenia of established, clear Bible doctrine. And it's not just happening from the outside world, it's also happening within the church.

Now, I could spend our time talking about the various doctrines that are under threat today. I could point to the the movement in Reformed circles that is redefining the Doctrine of Total Depravity and seeking to limit in an unbiblical way to merely the Doctrine of Total Inability. That's a threat. I could point to the total failure of churches in the Doctrine of Worship, where churches have turned worship into nothing more than the pursuit of an

emotional high instead of recognizing that we are to worship God with fear and awe because He is in fact a consuming fire, not filled with “glory and freedom”, but with the precedent of reducing two of His foremost worship leaders to piles of ash because they offered “strange fire”. I could highlight the increasing denial of the Doctrine of Inerrancy, whether that’s by those such as Tim Keller and the Biologos organization that would attempt to redefine Genesis 1 and 2 to make it compatible with the godless and disproven theory of evolution, or by those who would seek to reverse the God-design roles for men and women, making men effeminate, man-bun wearing non-leaders and women masculine, offputting usurpers who both abandon their God-ordained roles in society.

But along with those serious errors, there is another lie underpinning them all. There is a common miscategorization of doctrine today as being somehow unimportant. We have created these categories of “primary” doctrines, “secondary” doctrines, and even “tertiary” doctrines, and those are seemingly arbitrary. The Bible nowhere makes such categorizations, and while it does say in 1 Corinthians 15 that the Gospel is of “first importance”, that does not imply that other so-called “non-Gospel” doctrines are therefore unimportant. Paul talks about in Romans 14 “matters of opinion”, and he is not referring there to Biblical teaching about doctrine. What the Bible teaches is not a matter of opinion, and it’s not unimportant. The infinite, all-powerful, creator God of the universe, took the time to painstakingly author a miraculous, divine book of His Thoughts for what He thought we need to know in order for our eternal souls to be saved, and He didn’t put fluff in there.

Our passage this evening is going to help disabuse you of that notion, and so let’s look at 1 Tim. 4:6–16. I’m going to show you how Paul not only makes doctrine paramount, but he also commands it. So not only is doctrine a matter of extreme importance, it’s also a matter of obedience. I want to focus specifically on verse 16, but for context I’ll start reading in verse 6. The Apostle Paul writes,

In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.

Prescribe and teach these things. Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. **Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.**

So, before we delve into verse 16 more deeply, I want to just look with you at an overview of this entire passage, and I want to point out some observations by way of context, and then we'll look at Paul's flow of thought leading into verse 16, and then we'll parse out verse 16 itself and see what kind of conclusions we can draw from it. Sound good? Okay, here we go.

First, I want to highlight that this entire passage is all about doctrine. Paul is focused here on doctrine. And to show you that, I want to point out the number of times Paul uses the word, or a root of it, for "doctrine". First, in verse 6. Paul says, "In point out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound *doctrine* which you have been following." There it is, *didaskalia*, or "doctrine", as you see there.

Now skip down to verse 11. We see that Paul writes, "Command and *teach* these things." The word "teach" there is the verb form of the word "doctrine".

Now look in verse 13. Paul says to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to *teaching*." There's the word for "doctrine" again. We could have just as easily translated this, "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to *doctrine*."

And then finally, in our verse tonight, verse 16, we read, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the *teaching*." And again, that's the word *didaskalia*, or "doctrine".

So, four times in this section Paul refers to "doctrine". He starts this section to Timothy by emphasizing doctrine, he continually pushes Timothy to focus on doctrine, even commanding it, and then he closes this section by emphasizing doctrine. There's no question that in Paul's mind, doctrine was paramount.

The second thing I want to look at is the words that Paul uses to emphasize doctrine. They are strong words. Words of command. In verse 6, Timothy is to be nourished in doctrine. In verse 13, Timothy is to be devoted to doctrine. In verse 15, Timothy is to be immersed in doctrine. And in verse 16, Timothy is "keep a close watch" on doctrine and persist in it. Let's look at each of those words a little more fully.

In verse 6, Paul commands Timothy to be *nourished* or *trained* in doctrine. The word Paul uses is *entrepho*. It means literally "to be nourished". The root words means "feed". Now, what's the purpose of food? It's to sustain life. When we eat physical food, we are taking in the nutrients and the vitamins and the energy our bodies need to continue function as God designed them, so that we may use our bodies to accomplish that which God wills. But where does our spiritual life come from? How do we take in the nutrients into our spiritual life so that we are equipped to be spiritually healthy followers of Christ? That happens by being taught doctrine. In other words, if you're not ingesting sound, Biblical doctrine on a regular basis, you are a malnourished and spiritually anemic individual.

In verse 13, Paul writes that Timothy is to "give attention to" doctrine. The Greek word is *prosecho*, meaning "to give full attention." It's a compound word from two words meaning "to hold your mind toward." The idea is where do you place your focus? If you were a visitor to the church at Ephesus where Timothy was ministering, Paul wanted you to come away from that visit saying, "Man, that church is focused on doctrine."

Now look at verse 15, we see Paul commanding Timothy to "Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them." Paul here is referring to the commands toward doctrine that he just wrote to Timothy. And he says Timothy is to "take pains" with them. Literally, it's to

“revolve the mind” around them, or to “exercise myself in”. Other synonyms are “study”, “ponder”, or “premeditate”. And then Paul says Timothy is to “be absorbed in them”. This is literally translated, “exist in them”. Timothy’s waking thought, his whole life, is to be consumed with these things. His entire bent of life is to be driven by the teaching found in Scripture, and he is to take great pains to exercise his mind towards learning them.

And finally, we come to our verse tonight, verse 16. Paul writes to Timothy, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching,” or “doctrine”, “persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.”

Now, I want to walk you through the flow of Paul’s thought starting in verse 6 to lead you up to this verse. Paul starts this section by telling Timothy that as Timothy teaches the church the doctrine on which he has been nourished, that he will be a good servant of Christ. He warns Timothy against becoming enamored with the lies of the world, but instead Timothy is to be trained in this sound doctrine so that he will be more and more Godly. This is important and trustworthy because spiritual training is far more profitable than mere earthly, physical training.

But notice the motivation Paul gives for doing so in verse 10: Paul says, “For it is for this [the promise for the present life and also for the life to come] we labor and strive, *because we have fixed our hope on the living God.*” In other words, Paul is connecting training in sound doctrine as an outcome of salvation. The one goes with the other. You become a believer; you then “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” The motivation for the Christian, then, should be, “Because God saw fit to rescue me, a wretched sinner, by purchasing me with the blood of His own Son, then I want to learn everything the Bible teaches about God, who He is, how He works, what He does, and what He wants me to be like!”

And then in verse 11, we see that the reason Paul is commanding Timothy in these things is so that Timothy might be an example to the church at Ephesus. Doesn’t that sound familiar from last week? Timothy is to be, get this, “a model forged by repetition” to the other believers at Ephesus. Remember what is to be repeated? Day after day, week after week, Timothy is to be devoted to training himself in sound doctrine so that his life will reflect Christ’s teachings to the rest of the church.

And so because of that, Paul then presses on Timothy the importance and the emphasis on teaching doctrine. There’s an insistency there; Paul is almost urgent. He’s saying to Timothy over and over: “Timothy, doctrine is your life. Devote yourself to the scriptures and the doctrine they teach. Take pains with them. Do not neglect the gifting you have been given in this area. It is for a purpose, therefore, absorb yourself in it. Give yourself wholly to it!”

And all of that pressing, all of that hammering home that Paul is doing to poor young Timothy comes to this rising crescendo in verse 16, where Paul culminates by telling Timothy, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” So let’s dive into this verse and see what Paul is telling Timothy.

Paul tells Timothy to “pay close attention”. This is an interesting word. Earlier in verse 13, Paul told Timothy to “give attention to”. This is like that, only moreso. Stronger. More intense. It’s not just, “Timothy, pay attention to”, it’s “Timothy, pay *close* attention to”. It means to pay attention to something, and then keep your attention on it. Focus on it to

the exclusion of all other distractions.

Let me show you an example from Scripture of what that looks like. Turn with me to Acts 3. At the beginning of this chapter, Peter and John heal a lame beggar. And look in verse 3: “Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said “Look at us.” And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them.”

Do you see that part where the lame beggar fixed his attention on Peter and John? That’s the same word. That beggar paid close attention to the apostles. He wasn’t going to let his attention waver for one second, because he was going to get something from them.

That’s the same way Timothy is to treat these things that Paul writes about. He is expected to gain Godliness from it, and therefore, Timothy should not let his attention waver from the pursuit and training of doctrine. “Pay close attention.”

Next in 1 Timothy we see what it is that Timothy is to pay close attention to. And Paul identifies two things for Timothy to be laser-focused on: he tells Timothy, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching.” The object of Timothy’s focus is himself and his teaching, or doctrine. Let’s look at each of those:

First, Paul tells Timothy to pay close attention to “yourself”. Now, we use that word, “self” or “yourself” to mean many different things, right? For example, if someone you know is really pushing themselves hard over a period of time, and maybe you’re concerned they might get themselves run down and become sick, you might tell them, “Hey, take care of yourself.” In that case, we’re referring to their physical well-being.

Or, maybe someone does well at their job or maybe at school or in some competition, and we might tell them, “You should be proud of yourself,” meaning, they might feel a sense of accomplishment at being recognized.

Or, maybe someone is about to go into a potentially dangerous or risky situation, and we tell them, “Watch out for yourself.” In other words, we are expressing concern for their personal safety.

So, the term “yourself” can be used in a variety of different ways. So what does Paul mean here when he tells Timothy to “Pay close attention to *yourself*”? Well, in context, notice Paul has been talking about Godliness. He’s commanded Timothy to be an example in “speech, conduct, love, faith and purity.” He’s mentioned that Timothy should have “progress” in each of those things.

So when Paul tells Timothy to pay close attention to “yourself”, he’s telling Timothy to be laser-focused to make sure his pattern of life, his “spiritual walk” as it were, reflects the qualities of godliness in increasing measure. It’s a caution against Timothy against letting his guard down in his spiritual life, but more than that, it’s also an exhortation for Timothy to “excel still more” in those things. Timothy is to pay close attention to his life so that Timothy makes sure that all of the Godliness that has been deposited into Timothy’s heart and mind works its way out and shines forth clearly in Timothy’s life. “Pay close attention to yourself.”

But that’s not the only thing that Paul wants Timothy laser-focused on: he also tells Timothy to pay close attention to “your teaching”. This word for “teaching”, as we’ve already seen, is simply the word for “doctrine”. Timothy is to make sure that he himself is in tune with accurate, correct, and the entirety of Biblical doctrine. Timothy is to make sure that he himself has a clear view of what the Bible teaches, and he is to constantly

monitor himself to make sure that he doesn't stray from Biblical doctrine or is taken "captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world." (Col 2:8) Timothy is to pay attention to what he believes and constantly assess his beliefs and his thoughts and his conclusions to make sure they in keeping with what Paul has taught him.

But more than that, notice that it's not a limited scope that Paul indicates. He doesn't tell Timothy, "this or that teaching." He's not telling Timothy to focus in one particular area of teaching. It's "*the* teaching." It's the definite article in the Greek, and Paul has in view the entire sweeping body of apostolic writing, which was based on the Old Testament, that was being written down and preserved as the New Testament was being formed. In other words, when Paul tells Timothy to pay close attention to "*the* teaching", he has in mind the entirety of Biblical doctrine. In Acts 20, during his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul puts it this way in verse 27. He says, "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the *whole purpose of God*."

Timothy is not to minimize any particular doctrine and substitute it with an increase in another doctrine. Instead, Timothy is to remain focused on teaching the entire body of apostolic doctrine as it is contained in Scriptures. He is to march through those teachings, and when he gets to the hard parts, guess what? Does he just gloss over those things that might make his hearers uncomfortable? No, Timothy is responsible for declaring the whole counsel of God, both in season and out of season.

Now, I want to make sure that we're very clear about a subtle but dangerous trap that we might fall into here. Paul tells Timothy to pay close attention to two things here: Timothy's life and Timothy's doctrine. We might be tempted to treat those and two separate but unrelated things, and that's the trap. We live in age where we have attempted to divorce the idea of practice of life from being trained in doctrine, as if one doesn't affect the other. You may have heard pastors or other teachers stand up and say, "Well, doctrine is important and all that, but we really just want to love people."

Whenever I hear someone say that, my first thought is that that person doesn't know a thing about either doctrine or practice of life. And if you ever hear someone say that, you either need to tell that person to sit down and quit teaching until they have a better grasp of things, or you need to run, because that mentality is not something you need to be under. That is a deadly dangerous and wrong-headed idea, that doctrine and life are unrelated.

In fact, it's even worse, because not only do we live in an evangelical culture where we have divorced the ideas of doctrine and life as being unrelated, but our culture has taken it one step further and said, "Actually, doctrine isn't really all that important, what's really important is life."

And that is deadly! It is a lie from the pit of hell. It's not reflective of reality. The fact of the matter is, not only are doctrine and life related, but of the two, doctrine is of supreme importance. It's one of the most important things you can place your focus on as a Christian.

And let me show you why that is. Recall what we've seen regarding doctrine in this passage. Doctrine, as you remember, is simply defined as "the teaching of the Bible." It's what the Bible teaches. And Paul has commanded Timothy in this passage to be nourished by doctrine, to be absorbed in doctrine, to be laser-focused on doctrine, but why? Again, we have seen that's because Timothy is to continually train himself for the purpose of Godliness.

Now, look with me at two passages in the gospels. Look with me first at Matt. 15:18–19. Here, Jesus says, “But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.” Everyone has a heart, and inner being if you will. And what is in that heart will work itself in your outward life. And we see here that in the absence of anything else, in your natural state prior to being converted and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, what is in your heart is sinful depravity. And it works itself in all manner of sinful actions: evil thoughts, murders, immorality, etc. So what is inside you will be shown in your life.

Now, turn with me back a few chapters to Matt. 12:33–35. In Matthew 15, we saw that the heart naturally contains only evil. But here, in this passage, we see another possibility. Jesus says, “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.”

Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees here, and He makes a contrast between the “good man” and the “evil man”. The evil man, as we just saw in Matthew 15, has evil treasure in his heart, and therefore brings out what is evil in his life. But the good man has good treasure in his heart, and therefore he brings out what is good in his life. Now, here’s the million dollar question: how do you become a good man and get good treasure in your heart?

First, you must be saved by being regenerated and converted and then indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That’s pretty good, right? But is that all? No! Because we’re expected to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”, the Holy Spirit supernaturally authored 66 books of the Bible so that we might know how to do that. And our job is to get those teachings, all of them, into our minds, and into our hearts, so that then, out of what is in our hearts will overflow into our lives.

In other words, what you believe will be shown in how you live! You don’t have an option! Does water have a choice as to whether or not to be wet? No. Does the sun have a choice as to whether or not to rise in the east? No. Those are just true. They are what we call axiomatic. They just are. And it’s the same way with doctrine and life. What you believe about doctrine will be shown in the way you live your life. It’s just a fact of reality.

John MacArthur puts it this way. In talking about sanctification, Bible study, and doctrine, he identifies three stages. First, there’s comprehension. You read, study, and understand what is being taught in the Bible. Then, there’s conviction. You ponder it, believe that it is true, accept it into your own life, and internalize it. And finally, there’s affection. Not only do you have a fondness for doctrine and a love for the truth, but that affection displays itself in a love for Christ and an obedience to His commands in the way you live out your life.

Now, going back to 1 Timothy 4, those are the things Paul is telling Timothy to pay close attention to.