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Church Relationships, Part 12

When God called Abraham out of the land of Ur, His redemptive plan intersected time such that the Lord organized Abraham and his children into a community, a clan, and a family. From that point on — and it has never changed — the people of God were to relate to one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord!

Fast forward the clock 1,800 years to the time of Christ, and we have the Lord grafting Gentiles *en masse* into the redemptive plan begun with Abraham! How important it would be therefore that both Jew and Greek understood themselves in Christ to be brothers and sisters! They were NOT two distinct peoples, BUT one in the Lord!

Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek... you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Accordingly, the exhortation is given throughout the New Testament regarding the peace and unity of the body of Christ. Christ, in describing the mark that would characterize His people said this:

John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

One of the most important characteristics of the body of Christ is love for one another! To this end, we read of Paul's exhortation to a mixed body of both Jews and Gentiles:

Ephesians 4:3, "[Be] diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."¹

Unity/peace are the incarnational realities of a loving church family. This therefore must become our expectation for this or any church body!

In this regard, spiritual giftings from the Lord complicate things.

Ephesians 4:3-7, "[Be] diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. [Why?] *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. BUT [and this is where it gets complicated] to each one of us grace was given [talking about spiritual gifts] according to the measure of Christ's gift."

Did you get that? In our unity (vv. 3-6), God has given each of us a unique purpose and calling requiring a unique gifting from the Lord (v. 7). This engifting creates a diversity in our unity and so the possibility of disagreement/conflict in the body of Christ. Accordingly, Paul gave this command in his teaching on Spiritual Gifts:

1 Corinthians 12:14-15, 18, 25, "For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not *a part* of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not *a part* of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body... But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired... [Accordingly] there should be no division in the body, but *that* the members should have the same care for one another."

In other words, because God has created a diversity in the midst of our unity we are called NOT to make distinctions, BUT to enjoy our differences. Why? Because each spiritual gift has been selected by God and hand-given to the believer unto the corporate love, care, and edification of the body!

It is in light our diversity that Paul included this final section as he closes his teaching to the

Thessalonians. The overarching concern of this periscope is this:

1 Thessalonians 5:13b, "Live in peace with one another."

Because of the differences that exist in any body, there are hundreds of opportunities for making distinctions and so being divided. So, Paul said, *"Don't Do That! Labor to live in peace with one another. Submit what you have and what you are to the greater end of the building up the body of Christ!"*

Toward that end, Paul gave four final exhortations when it comes to the relationships that ought to characterize the body of Christ; those pertaining to our relationship with:

- The Leaders in the Body, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a.
- Each Other, 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15.
- The Lord- because the bitter providences that will come our way, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.
- The Holy Spirit- because the gifts He gives to the body- the section we currently are on, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.

We must be careful NOT to "quench the fire of the Spirit of God" as He works in and through the body of Christ engifting it for service. Now while Paul could have used many examples, he chose here to focus on the ministry of the preached word, because this was being abused in the Thessalonian church. Accordingly, when it comes to the pulpit we must look with humility upon all apparent workings of the Spirit, v. 20. The focus here is on our attitude and so our willingness to submit to a pulpit. Humanly speaking, there are many reasons we might struggle with a preacher or his preaching:

- His voice.
- His dress.
- His demeanor.
- An annoying mannerism.
- A bad outline.
- A prior conflict with the individual.

None of these are reasons for rejecting a pulpit! Don't ever forget this, that behind the sermon is the majesty and glory of a God who shakes mountains as He communicates with His people (cf. Exodus 20:18-21)! Accordingly, we must NOT let our bias, or any external factor, distract us from the teaching of God's word! It is NOT a man who is teaching, BUT God! Receive the sermon accordingly!

But that is NOT to say we don't evaluate those who minister to us; which brings us to a second exhortation. We must diligently examine the apparent workings of the Spirit, v. 21. The Scripture indicates that every preacher ought to be examined based on these things:

- Their Character — which involves their motives, standards, loyalties, and attitude (1 Timothy 4:2; 1 Peter 5:2). David was very clear when it came to those qualified to minister in the body of Christ. He said, “He who walks in a blameless way is the one who will minister to me” (Psalm 101:6). Diagnostic questions include these: Are those who minister men of God? Do they love the Lord? Are they grieved by their sin? Are they men of character?
- Their Content — what is taught or preached (Matthew 12:34-35; Isaiah 8:20; 1 Corinthians 12:3). Clearly, the content/teaching of an individual or ministry must also be examined. As we’ve seen, if it is heterodox, the teacher/teaching must be rejected... period! Now again this doesn’t mean that a true teacher won’t make mistakes from time to time; they are sinners! But the questions are these: (1) What is the mistake? What doctrine was contradicted? (2) How does he respond when corrected? If there is a repeated contradicting of truth and/or defensiveness when confronted, that person ought not to be in ministry!
- The Consequences/Fruit of their Ministry (Hebrews 13:7; Matthew 7:15-17; James 3:13-18). Another important measurement is the impact of a minister/servant when it comes to God’s people. Is the net effect of their ministry that of godliness, humility, peace, purity, devotion? Or is their path strewn with bodies- spiritual defection, discord, conflict, acrimony, and the like?
- Their Converts — the impact of the teaching of God in their lives (2 Peter 2:2; 2 Timothy 4:3). While this isn’t the only test, nevertheless oft-times the nature of the false servant will be manifested in the lives of those in their ministry. Are they kind, gracious, caring? Or are they consumers who bite and devour?

This brings us to Paul’s final point. And while the overarching point of this section is that we NOT quench any work of the Spirit of God (and so any engifting in the body), the focus of our passage remains on the pulpit, thus it is how to listen to a sermon. In this regard, having examined a preacher and his preaching; if it is faithful we must embrace the ministry, v. 21.

1 Thessalonians 5:21, “but examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good.”

This is an interesting choice of words. The Greek is *κατέχω* (*katechō*) from which we get the word “catechize.” What are we doing when we “catechize”? We are endeavoring to “hold fast” to a truth! That is the idea behind this word. And yet, it goes beyond simply “holding fast.” For example, the word is used speaking of Paul’s journey to Rome:

Acts 27:40, “And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders, and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach.”

To “hold fast” to a teaching considering its use here is to make it the direction or goal of our lives. We see this in Christ’s parable of the ungrateful stewards.

Matthew 21:38, “But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and seize his inheritance.’”²

To “hold fast” to a teaching in light of this use is to take ownership over it.

In Romans Paul uses this term speaking about the power of sin relation to the gospel.

Romans 7:6, “But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound [controlled], so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”

Here, to “hold fast” to a teaching in light of its use here is to so unite us with the truth that it controls us!

We see it used in another parable of Christ, the parable of the four soils.

Luke 8:15, “And the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.”

To “hold fast” to a teaching in this nuance is to live in light of it!

From this we see that “holding fast” to a teaching describes the action of taking a message to heart, believing it, acting upon it, allowing it to control you, and so bearing the resulting fruit in one’s life. In other words, it is living considering the preached word. It is working diligently at applying it to your life!

1 Thessalonians 5:21, “hold fast to that which is good.”

The word behind “good” here is *καλός* (*kalos*) which we’ve seen many times before. It refers to that which is inherently good, that which is good by its nature.³ The word was used to designate the genuine over the spurious, as in a coin or document.

Now, coupled with the exhortation to “examine everything carefully” (which speaks of *a test which determines the worth of something*- as in the testing of metals [cf. 1 Peter 1:7]), we note that Paul is thinking in terms of the refining process. When a metal is heated in a crucible eventually impurities are burnt off and the metal/gold becomes pure! That is the objective of any and every test that we might subject a minister or ministry to; the determination of its fidelity to God’s Word.

Our call therefore is to do what is necessary to discern that a teaching/ministry is genuine/pure. If it is, our responsibility is to strive diligently to embody that teaching in our lives, to “hold it fast”!

When the pulpit is godly we are called to do far more than these things:

- Be fascinated by a truth.
- Be wowed by a doctrine.
- Be emotionally moved by a message.

This is important because the last days will be characterized by men and women in the church, “Always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7)!

The focus/emphasis in Scripture is NOT simply orthodoxy, BUT orthopraxy, right living! When we hear a sermon, we are called to evaluate what difference the truth of a text ought to have in our lives! The following chart is designed to help you apply a sermon.

Realm	God	Self	Family	Church	World
<u>Physical</u> : What should I do as it pertains to...					
<u>Mental</u> : What should I think as it pertains to...					
<u>Volitional</u> : What should I desire as it pertains to...					

I trust this is of benefit. However, I have found it far more helpful with every passage I read or sermon I hear to ask three questions in response.

1. What is the text saying? Is there anything I don’t understand in the passage? If so, I need to study the passage to answer those questions.
2. Of the many truths being taught in the text (which means you need to identify them), which truth strikes you, moves you, or interests you?
3. If you were living in light of that truth yesterday, what difference would it have made?

Once you arrive at the third question, you have something to pray about, to seek accountability with, and so to endeavor to implement in your life. That is the idea behind “...holding fast to that which is good.”

But what if after examining the pulpit, I conclude that the message is wrong? Again, we are NOT talking here about a false statement or a misunderstood word. Rather, we are talking

about heterodoxy and so outright error! If that should be the case, Paul has given us direction; if it is false, we must have nothing to do with the ministry.

1 Thessalonians 5:22, “abstain from every form of evil.”

The word for “abstain” is ἀπέχω (*apechō*) which is translated as “to hold back,” “keep off,” or “to be away or distant from” It is the exact opposite of “holding fast.” The idea is that of distancing yourself from someone or something! It denotes complete separation as in the parable of the prodigal son.

Luke 15:20, “And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off [In other words, he was not with his father in any way; he was far away] his father saw him...”

Christ used this term speaking of the Jews of His day:

Matthew 15:8, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.”

The people are completely and totally separate from God, His Kingdom, His will, His thoughts, His desire! Now, when this word is in the middle voice- as it is in our text- the idea is that of *COMPLETE AND TOTAL SEVERANCE*. At the Jerusalem Council, the apostles instructed all Christendom:

Acts 15:29, “That you abstain [a middle voice denoting complete abstinence] from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication...”

And that is the idea here! When after evaluating a preacher, we determine he is a false prophet, we are called to the exact opposite of “holding fast”. We must reject their ministry and their message completely and totally! And yet, that doesn’t go far enough. Notice how Paul put it:

1 Thessalonians 5:22, “abstain from every form of evil.”

The word for “form” is εἶδος (*eidos*) which references that which is seen. In other words, we are NOT talking here only about the erroneous statements of a false preacher; it is *everything* they say; *everything* that can be seen or perceived about them and their teaching. This means we don’t read their books, use their commentaries, or sift through their devotionals. If they are false teachers, the entirety of their ministry is to be rejected! Again, the command here is total and complete severance!

It is amazing how cavalier many in the church are when it comes to bad theology and bad preaching! We think any rejection of a teacher or a teaching is not-loving. And so, we endure

the false preacher. What a far cry from the biblical exhortation.

Proverbs 14:16, “A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless.”

The words used in association with a false teacher or his teaching in Scripture are rather strong. They are “flee,” “depart,” “hate,” “turn away from,” “hide yourself from” (cf. 2 Timothy 2:22; Psalm 34:14; 37:27; 97:10; Proverbs 3:7; 8:13; 22:3). That is the response of a man/woman of God making a claim to godliness! That is the response of a wise man! Listen to the strong words Jude used to describe the false teacher:

Jude 4, 10-11a, 12-13, 16-19, “4 For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ... 10 But these men revile the things which they do not understand; and the things which they know by instinct, like unreasoning animals, by these things they are destroyed. Woe to them! [which means, ‘Damned to hell are they!']... 12 These men are those who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever... 16 These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their *own* lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of *gaining an* advantage. But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, that they were saying to you, ‘In the last time there shall be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts.’ These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit.”

Family of God, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Galatians 5:9)! Accordingly, when it comes to the false teacher and his teaching, there must be complete and total rejection! Considering this, listen to how carefully we are to proceed if we should endeavor to protect a brother or sister trapped by such teaching.

Jude 23, “On some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.”- we are talking here about a serious rejection of any and all false teaching! There is NO PLACE for hesitation, equivocation, or indifference! When dealing with them or their teaching, we proceed with the utmost caution and sobriety!

In fact, in Scripture, when it comes to the false teacher and his teaching, “abstaining” means these things:

- We Must Not Support their Ministry, 2 John 10-11. This would include financial (v. 10a) as well as prayer support (v. 10b).
- We Must Not Submit in Any Way or Form to their Ministry, Romans 16:17-18.
- If Possible, We Must Rebuke them because their Error, Matthew 4:1-11; Titus 1:11.

We Must Endeavor to Save Others from their Ministry, Jude 22-23.

That is how you approach a pulpit. And yet as I referenced, Paul's example regarding the pulpit is but one of many he could have used, because there are many ways the Holy Spirit works in the context of a local body as He engifts the church. That means when it comes to ministry within or without the body of Christ, we likewise must be discerning.

At first blush it might seem loving to be accepting and encouraging of all who minister in the name of Christ. Yet not only is that in error, that is potentially damaging to the Kingdom and King whom we love!

2 John 10-11, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into *your* house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds."

So we must be discerning in a world that plays fast and loose with truth!

When it comes to the ministers and ministries of God's Kingdom, we have the threefold obligation:

1. To examine everything carefully- testing the Spirits.
2. If a ministry/minister is deemed to be a genuine servant of Christ, then we must respond with humility and grace endeavoring to submit ourselves to the Lord and His word in and through all things.
3. If a ministry/minister is deemed to be false, then we must abstain from any interaction with the teacher or teaching!

In the ever-slippery world of the last days, may God give us the grace to stand firm in Christ and His word!

End Note(s)

¹ How do maintain this peace? What is necessary for a body to dwell together in unity? We must come to know and so confess the same truth (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10; Phil. 1:27)!

² See also 1 Corinthians 7:30.

³ This is in contrast to ἀγαθός [*agathos*] which primarily references something that has a favorable result).