

Editorial: Guard the Gospel of Truth

Stephen J. Wellum

Stephen J. Wellum is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

It is safe to say that the issue of “truth” has fallen on hard times in our day. Living in what has been dubbed a “postmodern” culture, people are quite skeptical about the human ability to know the truth. In a self-conscious reaction to the modernism of the Enlightenment, *post*-modernism has rightly criticized modernism’s naïve confidence in human reason, science, and progress. However, in so doing, it has also declared that there is no such thing as objective and universal truth. Instead, truth is merely subjective, perspectival, and culturally conditioned; and, thus, we are told on every side that we must respect and tolerate everyone’s viewpoint as equal no matter what it may be. It is in this sense that “pluralism” is an offshoot of post-modernism since, as pluralism maintains, if there is no objective truth that may be discovered by human beings then who are we to say that our view is any better than any other perspective.

Of course, the implications of this mindset and attitude for the gospel and Christian ministry are staggering. If accepted, in the end, there is no gospel, at least in the biblical sense of the word. For at the heart of the good news is the fact that the God of creation, providence, and redemption has disclosed himself to us in a Word-revelation, and uniquely so, in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ (see Heb 1:1-3), and that it is precisely for this reason that there is such a thing as objective and universal truth. Moreover, it is also for this very reason that we, as God’s people, must stand firm for the truth of the gospel in such a day as ours. We must not only declare the truth, we

must also practice it in our daily lives, both at the individual and corporate level. We must hear afresh the words of the apostle Paul to Timothy—“Guard the gospel of truth” (see 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 3:14-17; 4:2-5; Titus 2:1).

A helpful antidote to help the church avoid the relativistic tendencies of our postmodern age is the Pastoral Epistles. Often neglected in the life of today’s church, the Pastorals are a necessary corrective and reminder for the contemporary church as to the need, urgency, and privilege of standing firm for the gospel. In them, we find the apostle Paul, at the end of his life, giving instructions to Timothy and Titus not only to guard the precious deposit of truth (1 Tim 1:19; 3:9; 6:20) and to stand firm against false teachers who were seeking to undermine the truth (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12), but also, in turn, to pass on the gospel to subsequent generations by the selection of future pastoral leaders who likewise will do the same. If ever we needed to read and obey the instruction of these Scriptural letters, it is today.

But the Pastorals not only provide incentive, exhortation, and encouragement to stand for the truth in our day, they also provide crucial and practical instruction as to how to order our corporate life together, as the body of Christ. In a day riddled with confusion as to how to be the church, the Pastorals are essential in giving us instruction in such areas as: prayer (see 1 Tim 2:1-8), gender roles in the church (see 1 Tim 2:9-15), church leadership (see 1 Tim 4:1-16; 2 Tim 2:1-8, 14-26; 3:1-4:5), qualifications for pastoral leadership (1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9), and everyday affairs of church life

and praxis (see 1 Tim 5-6; Titus 2:1-15). If ever the church needed instruction in these important matters, it is certainly today.

In this issue of the journal, four contributors help us think through crucial issues in the Pastorals for today's church. Andreas Köstenberger provides an excellent discussion of some of the current hermeneutical and exegetical challenges that face us as readers of the Pastoral Epistles. Specifically, he addresses the perennial debate surrounding the authorship of the Pastorals, concluding that Pauline authorship is important to affirm in our interpretation of the epistles. In addition, he wisely navigates the issue of the continuing relevance of the Pastorals for the church today, and leads us into a very helpful discussion of some of the exegetical issues surrounding our understanding of the offices of elder and deacon. Ray Van Neste contributes a succinct, yet helpful overview of Titus, showing both its importance and relevance for the contemporary church. Ben Merkle tackles some of the current debate surrounding the terms "elder" and "overseer" in the Pastorals, and argues, in contrast to a recent trend in scholarship, that these terms represent the same office in the Epistles, and thus helps us think through some crucial issues in the area of church leadership structures and organization. Finally, Philip Towner reflects on Paul's exhortation in 1 Timothy 4:13 to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture" and helps us think through the importance of the public reading of Scripture for the church today.

In addition to the above contributions, we have included two articles that do not directly relate to the Pastorals, yet they have everything to do with the need to stand for the truth of the gospel. In light of the ongoing debate over open theism and

its revision of the biblical presentation of God, Paul Helseth introduces us to recent discussion in this debate while critically analyzing Gregory Boyd's recent proposal of "Neo-Molinism." For all of us who are concerned with this very important issue, Helseth's contribution is a crucial read. And finally, Michael Haykin introduces us to two giants of the faith from the Patristic Era, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, who, in their day, contended for the truth in defending the biblical teaching regarding the deity of the Holy Spirit in light of the false teachers of that day.

It is my prayer that as you read this issue of the journal, not only will your mind be engaged and instructed, but your heart will be inflamed. And together, as God's people, we will stand for the truth of the gospel in our generation, both in its doctrinal formulation as well as its practical outworking in our lives—individually and corporately.

On behalf of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I want to thank Thomas Schreiner for his excellent and faithful work as editor of *SBJT* over these last four years. Though we are pleased Tom is assuming additional administrative responsibilities at the seminary, his leadership will be greatly missed at the journal. In his place, I will serve as editor with the goal of continuing in the footsteps of previous editors committed to standing for the truth of the gospel in today's world.

Finally, *SBJT* readers should note that our office email address has changed. The new address is journaloffice@sbts.edu. Please use this address for any future email correspondence.