

Pastor: Train Your Church to Think Biblically!

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Tim has a passion for reading and is editor of 'Discerning Reader' (discerningreader.com), a very helpful website with catalogued thoughtful reviews of thousands of books of interest to evangelicals. Tim is married to Aileen, and they have three children. He is also a member of Grace Fellowship Church.

Mark Noll opened his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* with quite the zinger: "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind." Ouch. But sadly, the evidence bears out the truth behind this statement. What Paul said of the Jews of his day may well be said of many contemporary Christians. "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2). There are scores of professing Christians who have great zeal for God, but a zeal that is based on little knowledge of him. Such people inadvertently serve a God of their own imagining.

You may know people, as I do, who claim that it doesn't much matter what we believe as long as we love Jesus. "I'm not interested in theology; I just want to serve Jesus. That's the most important thing." Scripture paints us a different picture. God tells us with clarity that we are to train our minds, to fill our minds with what is true. We are to have minds that are informed by Scripture. One thing I've been impressed with in writing a book, in maintaining a web site that has become a daily stop for many people, in spending time with church lead-

ers and pastors and in meeting so many of God's people is the value, the importance, of modeling biblical thinking. I've been impressed with the value of maturity in the Christian life.

Sadly, society does not value maturity the way it once did. For the vast majority of human history there have really only been two categories of human beings: there have been children and adults. It was not until the 1940's that the term *teenager* began to appear in popular discourse. It was used to describe a transitional period between childhood and adulthood and, as the word caught on, it actually began to define and demand that period. No longer could a child become an adult; he first had to pass through adolescence. This is a period of mental, physical and emotional maturing, but it is also a period that came with its own expectations (among which was a lack of expectation) and its own freedoms.

We continue to discover societal repercussions. Think, for example, of the way that society regards youth and age. Teenagers are hip, adults are square; youth is cool, adulthood is boring; with immaturity comes freedom, with maturity

comes the captivity of responsibility. Who would have thought that acknowledging a period between childhood and adulthood could so change society's understanding of youth and age? Travel to a culture that has not yet adopted an understanding of adolescence and you may well find greater emphasis on the dignity of age and the foolishness of youth. Look to Scripture, and the book of Proverbs most notably, and you'll find that this is God's viewpoint; with age comes wisdom, with youth comes folly.

As time has gone on, the concept of adolescence has become ingrained in our culture so that we can hardly imagine human life without it. Adolescence is a time in which we expect behaviour that may not be childish but which is also not mature. As the years have gone by, adolescence has been extended. It was once thought to last for only a few years—perhaps from age thirteen to age eighteen. The consensus today is that it may not really end until a person's twenties or even early thirties. One recent study suggested that we should not consider a person an adult, we should not consider him a grown-up, until the age of thirty-four. This leaves him twenty years of transition between childhood and adulthood; twenty years to be a child in an adult body and in an adult world. Little wonder, then, that people are getting married later, are having children later, are making the transition to adulthood later. It is ironic that as society's median age rises based on improvements in health care, the behavioural age plummets.

It is interesting to note that this falling maturity has happened around the time that many parents began to base their lives around children. In days past, children were forced to go along with the adults, to go where they went and to learn how to be seen and not heard in adult situations. Today, though, parents cater to their children in an unprecedented way, setting their

schedule by the children instead of the other way around.

Not surprisingly, what is true of society is increasingly true of the church. Christians are increasingly refusing to grow up, stuck, it seems, in a kind of perpetual spiritual adolescence. It is not coincidental, I am sure, that many churches revolve around the membership instead of around the Word; on the people instead of their God. The centrality of Scripture has been replaced by the centrality of the self. Just as parents set their schedules around their children and while parents go where their children go, churches set their programs around the desires or needs of those who attend; they go where these people go. This culture that respects youth and reviles age has infiltrated the church. I am convinced there is a direct correlation between the dawn of teenagerhood and the rise of immaturity. There is a direct correlation between the rise of immaturity around us and the lack of maturity in the church. It may not be the *only* cause, but it is certainly at least one among them. The church has just as little expectation of maturity as does the world.

Over and against such a view we have Scripture which commands us to grow up. Scripture commends those who are mature in the faith—those whose lives give evidence of hearts and minds that have been shaped by God through Scripture. Scripture demands that we grow up and charges pastors with playing a uniquely critical role in that process. So this will be my charge to you today: Pastor, train your church to think biblically.

Here is how I worked into this topic: My reflections on the topic led me to Ephesians 4 where I found that God has given pastors the task of equipping God's people so that they may reach maturity. Working backward, I found that is God's

desire for each Christian that he be mature. Because we can only *live* what we *know*, because what we believe about God will necessarily impact how we seek to live for him, spiritual maturity depends on a mind that is mature. We can only have mature minds if we have trained ourselves to think biblically. We can only think biblically if we think in the first place. We will move through this in reverse order, beginning with the importance of thinking and wrapping up with the Bible's charge to you as a pastor to train your church to think biblically.

God Demands that we Think

We begin here, with God's desire that we be people who use our minds. It is perhaps ironic that from the outside Christians are labelled as people who refuse to use their minds, ignoring all the supposed evidence that God cannot, must not exist (as if there can be such thing as evidence that someone or something does not exist) while from the inside, conservative or Reformed Christians are labelled as people who rely too heavily on the intellect, replacing the work of the Holy Spirit with the work of the mind.

The clear teaching of Scripture is that God has given us minds and expects us to use them. Part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to renew our minds, to give us minds that are distinctly Christian. Throughout, the Bible tells us to guard our minds, to cleanse our minds, to purify our minds, to have minds that are genuinely Christian. Romans 12:2 tells us "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."

Proverbs may stand as the book that deals most clearly with the importance of a mind that is renewed, a mind that is distinctive from an unbelieving mind. Proverbs 2:1-6:

My son, if you receive my words

and treasure up my commandments
with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge
and understanding.

This whole passage is a large *if...then* statement, laying out certain conditions and then defining the reward that will come for those who meet such conditions. *If you receive my words, if you treasure up my commandments, if you incline your heart to understanding, if you call out for insight, if you seek for it...then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find knowledge of God.* These are admonitions to think, to ponder, to meditate, to understand.

God wants us to be people who use our minds. God demands that we be people who use our minds. And, indeed, the book of Proverbs serves to show us how much God values the mind. The Proverbs are meant to make us think; they reveal their treasure only to those who use their minds to open them, to unwrap them, to discover them. I remember once watching my daughter—she must have been about two at the time—as she found a pack of gum on the floor. She saw the gum inside the little plastic and foil wrapper and knew that it was a tasty treasure. And she spent a long time turning that package over, crinkling and crunching it, poking at it and trying to make her way

inside. Eventually she managed to manoeuvre her way inside and I watched her delight as she finally got the treasure she had worked so hard for and popped it into her mouth. Her hard work had paid off. This has long served as a little parable to me, a little picture of the way we are to regard Scripture.

You may think here of Jesus' parables. Like Proverbs they require thought and reflection. They may yield some benefit based on a cursory reading, but they yield so much more upon reflection, meditation. Such portions of Scripture show us that God expects us to use our minds simply to understand his words; how much more so, then, in dealing with the challenges life brings and actually applying that Word?

God Demands Maturity

We have seen that some people trumpet a childish faith as if that is the same as the childlike faith Jesus commends. Commenting on the epistle to the Hebrews, pastor and author Richard Phillips says this:

The recipients of this letter were like many Christians today who think that theology is a waste of time. What difference does it make, people ask, whether God is a Trinity or not, whether Christ's righteousness comes by imputation or infusion, and whether regeneration comes before faith or after? What is important, they say, is that we get along with each other. Then they cite passages commending a *childlike* faith, as if that were the same thing as a *childish* faith, that is, one

that is indifferent to or ignorant of the Word of God."

We know, of course, that the Bible does, indeed, tell us to be like children. But there are only two ways in which it does this. First, Jesus tells us to have a childlike faith. "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'" (Matthew 18:1-4). Here Jesus tells us to approach the kingdom with a simple and childlike trust in God. Our faith is to be like the faith of a child. And in 1 Corinthians 14:20 Paul writes, "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking." We are to be as innocent as children when it comes to evil. And this is all. These are the only ways in which we are to be like children. Far more common are the Bible's pleas with us to grow up, to strive for and to attain maturity.

The New Testament epistles alone tell us we are to be:

- Mature in thinking (1 Corinthians 14:20).
- Mature in our ability to withstand the world's temptations (Romans 12:2 – "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind")
- Mature in our confidence (Galatians 6)
- Mature in Doctrine (Hebrews 6 – "Let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity...")
- Mature in Love (1 Corinthians 13)

- Mature in Behaviour (1 Corinthians 3 - "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready.")

Time and again we read that we are to be mature, that we are to be adults. We are told to leave childish ways and to go on to maturity. Never is childishness commended or endorsed. More than once we encounter the distinction between milk and solid food. A child who is untrained, a Christian who is immature, is one who exists, or subsists, on a diet of milk. Peter tells the recipients of his letter that, as new converts, they should see themselves as infants and desire more than milk, "growing up to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). Paul uses this same metaphor in his letter to the Corinthians, telling them that he was forced to address them as worldly, fleshly people and not as mature Christians. "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh" (1 Corinthians 3:2,3a). His desire is that these people would grow into maturity but the sad reality is that they were and remain desperately immature. His demand, God's demand, is that this church grow up. Their fleshly behaviour serves as sure proof that they also have fleshly minds; they have a desperately immature faith.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews relies on this metaphor as well. In chapter 5 we learn that he wants to tell the church all about Melchizedek and his relationship to Jesus, the great and ultimate High Priest. And yet, he regrets, he cannot do this. What he has to say is hard, not in and of itself, but because these people have become hard of hearing; their hearts have become dull. It seems there must have been a time when they were showing spiritual progress and when they were eager

and willing to chew upon meat. But now they have regressed, they have slipped back, and are content again to subsist on their diet of milk. "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food..." (Hebrews 5:12). Things these people once new have been forgotten, doctrine that was once important to them has been tossed away. They have backslidden, they have regressed, they have forsaken maturity for immaturity. The pastor's exhortation to them is the same as Paul's: grow up! Learn to eat solid food!

God demands maturity of his people.

Let me pause to offer an aside, a word to you as pastors. God demands that *you* be mature. You know Paul's twin charges to Timothy, the ones that appear at the end of his first letter and at the start of his second. "O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you" (1 Timothy 6:20). And again, "By the Holy Spirit who dwells with us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Timothy 1:14). Paul had passed to Timothy this sacred deposit of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He had given to him the only thing he had to offer; Paul was destitute and, by his second letter, close to facing death. And to Timothy he had given his only possession of any value at all—the gospel message. As a mature and a maturing Christian, Timothy was able to accept this deposit and to guard it. And of course, Paul expected that Timothy would pass it on to other godly men who would also care for it, guard it, and pass it to the next generation. And in that way the gospel message has been passed to you. It has been passed to you in trust. Listen to this charge from the pen of John Stott:

The church of our day urgently needs to heed the message of this second letter of Paul to Timothy. For

all around us we see Christians and churches relaxing their grasp of the gospel, fumbling it, in danger of letting it drop from their hands altogether. A new generation of young Timothys is needed, who will guard the sacred deposit of the gospel, who are determined to proclaim it and are prepared to suffer for it, and who will pass it on pure and uncorrupted to the generation which in due course will rise up to follow them.”

Such people will need to exemplify the biblical thinking, the spiritual discernment, that was so important to the Apostle.

Spiritual Maturity is Inseparable from Spiritual Discernment

We just looked to Hebrews 6 to see how the author contrasts solid food with baby food. This same passage bridges us to this: spiritual maturity is inseparable from spiritual discernment. In verse fourteen, the author, a pastor to this church writes, “solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” Solid food, those doctrines that go beyond the basic tenets of the Christian faith, those doctrines that inform our lives so we can live as God would have us live, depend on a Christian’s ability to distinguish what is good from what is evil. It depends on spiritual discernment.

Spiritual discernment is a task that depends on the mind. Many Christians teach that discernment is something that is innate or something that happens on the level of the senses. These people might say that spiritual discernment is a kind of sixth

sense, a spiritual sense, which allows people to know things on a level that surpasses the usual mental faculties. It may be those things that “you know that you know that you know” as an old friend used to say. Such discernment does not depend upon the mind but upon the senses. But spiritual discernment, as we find it in Scripture, is always a task that depends on the mind. It is a task that depends upon a mature mind, a biblically-informed mind. The mind, empowered by the Holy Spirit and shaped by Scripture, becomes God’s means for determining what is good and what is evil. So when we discuss “thinking biblically” we are discussing spiritual discernment—this ability to know good from evil and to know right from wrong.

If we look to Scripture, we see that spiritual discernment is the skill of understanding and applying God’s Word with the purpose of distinguishing good from evil and right from wrong.

It is using the tool God provides us in his Word so we can gain his perspective. And isn’t it amazing that through Scripture and through the inward work of the Holy Spirit, he allows us to see things through his eyes and thus to see things as they really are. As wiping steam from a mirror brings clarity to the obscure, God’s Word brings sharpness, clarity and perspective, allowing us to understand what is truly true!

You may know Question and Answer 3 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It asks, “What do the Scriptures principally teach.” The answer is two-fold: “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.” This serves as a great summary of the purposes of the Scripture—it teaches us first what is true about God and, inseparable from that, how we are to live. It is only when we know who God is that we can serve him as he is. It is only when we know what is true

of God that we are equipped to live in the way he requires. And so the Bible has this theological dimension in which it tells us who God is, but it also has a moral or ethical dimension in which it instructs us in living in the ways that please him. The Bible is both theological and moral.

Spiritual discernment intersects both of these dimensions. It equips us to separate or distinguish what is true about God from what is false and it equips us to separate between what God requires us to do and what God forbids.

Conservative or Reformed churches tend to excel at the first of these; they teach right knowledge of God. But it may be that the weakness of conservative churches is in that area of application; of teaching people to use this knowledge in right living. Of course the equal and opposite error of other churches may be to emphasize ethics or morality without first understanding the person and character of God. Right deeds must be built upon the firm foundation of right knowledge. We cannot get this order wrong. We must teach who God is before we can teach how he would have us live.

I want to now defend the fact that spiritual maturity is inseparable from spiritual discernment. I want to show that a person who wishes to be mature is a person who must exercise discernment. If you want to have a mature church, you must have a discerning church—a church that thinks biblically. I see this in various places in Scripture, but primarily in this passage of Hebrews 5. Here we see the author of this letter telling the church why it is that they cannot understand the High Priestly functions of Christ. He tells them why it is that they are incapable of understanding doctrine that is truly not all that difficult to understand. He tells them that they are people of an immature faith and people of a backsliding faith. And he says that it is their lack of spiritual discernment

that has led them to this condition. In other words, if they had spiritual discernment they would also have spiritual maturity; but since they are not discerning, neither are they mature.

We find immaturity in the author's talk of "milk." "You need milk, not solid food," he says, "for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature..." (Hebrews 5:12b-14a). He is telling these people that they are trapped in spiritual immaturity. These are not recent converts but are people who were converted some years earlier, presumably under the teaching of one of the apostles or one of their disciples. Yet though they have been Christians for some time now, they are giving little evidence of maturity. Though they have been Christians long enough now that they ought to be taking the position of teachers, leading others deeper into the faith, instead they need people to teach them even the very basics. This imagery is supposed to invoke the picture of a person who is physically mature and yet insisting upon a diet of baby food. Imagine a person whose body craved meat, true sustenance, but who fed it nothing more than milk. Such a person would be sickly and weak; such a person would quickly succumb to illness, disease and death. And this is exactly the author's fear for this church's spiritual condition.

These Hebrew Christians are anticipating a period of persecution, a period when they may be called upon to stand for their faith and suffer for their Saviour. But they seem unwilling to do that. As persecution becomes more likely, they are considering tossing away the Christian faith and returning to the safety of Judaism. They are considering tossing away Jesus in favour of Moses. This, says the pastor, is a mark of immaturity. Only an immature Christian could fail to see how much greater Christ is than Moses. Look to the book of

Hebrews for the word *better* and you'll see just how often he compares Christianity to Judaism and how he concludes every time that Christ is better, Christ is greater than all of the rites and ceremonies and laws of the Old Testament. It is their lack of discernment, their lack of biblical thinking, that keeps them immature.

We find as well that the author tells these people that they are backsliding. Notice that little word "become." He tells them what he will need to teach them "again." He has been down this road before, he has taught them these things in the past. What he is teaching them now is what he has taught them in the past. Things that were once important to them have been forgotten or thrown away. What once mattered to them is now less important than their own safety, their own comfort. It seems that they have regressed instead of progressed in their Christian faith. And again, this lack of maturity, this regression in maturity, is a direct result of a lack of spiritual discernment. Had these people been able to distinguish what was true from what was false, what was wrong from what was right, they would see the superiority of Jesus over Moses, they would see the hope he offers, and they would flee *to* the cross rather than from it.

So after the author tells these people what they are and what they have become, he tells them what they need to be. They need to be mature; and they will become mature only by being people of spiritual discernment. "But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14). Those who wish to be spiritually mature are those who emphasize and who practice spiritual discernment. One cannot be separated from the other. Only this kind of Christian can "leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity..."

A Pastor is Responsible for his Church's Maturity

And now we come to this. It is among the pastor's responsibilities to ensure that his church is thinking biblically, that it is practicing spiritual discernment. In fact, this is really the very heart of the pastor's task—to lead Christians from immaturity to maturity. We see this most clearly in Ephesians 4. Paul writes this of Jesus Christ:

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

The ministry of God's Word through the undershepherds is a gracious gift of

God for it is his voice to his people. Pastors are to *equip* the saints. It is interesting to note that this word “equip” is used to speak of restoring broken limbs; it is the same word used in Matthew 4:21 to describe the fisherman repairing their nets and making them ready for use. Thus the pastor’s ministry is a ministry of binding up, building up, strengthening. Sinclair Ferguson writes, “Here the ministry of the Word of God does its own healing, cleansing, transforming work on our sinful and broken lives. The result is that through its exposition the preached and received word strengthens the fellowship of believers and builds it up in unity, knowledge of Christ, spiritual height, and balanced growth until it comes to spiritual maturity.”

The faithful ministry of the Word bears fruit in the lives of those who are privileged to enjoy it. The most immediate purpose of the pastor’s ministry is to equip the saints to go about the work of ministry. And the ultimate purpose of the ministry of all the saints is to build up the body of Christ through the gifts given to them. When this happens it brings about many benefits which in turn bring glory to God.

It encourages unity. As we sit under the teaching of the Word and as we sit under the *same* consistent teaching of the Word of God in the local church, our hearts and minds are shaped and formed in the same direction. Our minds, our hearts, our lives are conformed to the image of Christ. God’s one Truth revealed in Scripture, shapes this one Body to serve him as he truly is.

It teaches us about Christ. This teaching ministry leads us to an increased knowledge of the Son of God. This is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge, as if knowledge is a noble end in and of itself. Instead, it is knowledge that brings about change. We come face-to-face with Christ

through the words of the Bible and we come to know him as he is.

It leads to maturity. By letting the Word of God dwell richly within us (see Colossians 3:16) we become like Christ being led “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” When this happens they will no longer be like those Hebrew believers who were “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” Like a storm-tossed ship they were driven about by every force that rose up against them. They were like children who had no strength to resist. With maturity these Ephesian Christians will no longer be like children. “Maturity brings with it the capacity to evaluate various forms of teaching, to accept what is true and reject what is false.” Maturity brings with it, spiritual discernment.

False teaching was and is and remains a challenge to the church; it will remain this way until the Lord returns. False teaching is not something that arises quietly or incidentally; it is a result of outright deception and trickery. It was the very thing Paul had earlier warned the Ephesian elders against, saying in Acts 20:30 “from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” And what church hasn’t, at one time or another, had men arise who teach twisted things, seeking to draw believers away from the truth?

Against such false teaching, mature, discerning Christians are to speak the truth in love. The church grows in maturity in no other way than through truth and love. Instead of being immature Christians tossed by every wave of doctrine, we are to be Christians who stand firm in the truth, truth spoken with love. John Stott says, “Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not

strengthened by truth. The apostle calls us to hold the two together, which should not be difficult for Spirit-filled believers, since the Holy Spirit is himself 'the spirit of truth,' and his first fruit is 'love.'" There is no other route than this to a fully mature Christian unity."

I think we ought to pause to draw out this point just a little bit. One of the areas where discernment most often goes awry is in this area of speaking truth with love. Those who emphasize discernment are typically able to voice the truth; it is love that is far too often lacking. Many ministers, and perhaps even you, can testify to the damage done to churches in the name of discernment. Just recently pastor James MacDonald wrote that he has seen more damage done to the church by Christians with the gift of discernment than by anyone else. Many ministers have erred themselves in this regard, emphasizing truth at the expense of love. It is here that we should remember the Bible's injunctions to remain childlike. We can go back to 1 Corinthians 14:20 and see Paul's exhortation to "Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature." When it comes to what is evil, we need to remain as little children, being innocent toward all evil things. Too many people who emphasize discernment spend inordinate amounts of time seeking out evil, dwelling upon evil, all in the name of refuting it. There is great danger in filling our hearts and lives with what is evil. So as you train your church in discernment, do so in a way that encourages and edifies rather than in a way that tears down and destroys. More on this in a few moments.

You have heard the sermon illustration, I'm sure, that to train an expert in counterfeit currency you have him focus not on fake money but on real money. Once he has become an expert in what is genuine, it will be a simple task to identify what is fraudulent. Not too long ago I went to the Bank of Canada and interviewed an expert

on counterfeit currency and I found that this illustration is exactly true. If the Bank of Canada is going to train somebody to be an expert in currency, they begin by training him in the distinguishing characteristics of true money. They teach him to look long and hard for certain characteristics—micro-printing, holograms, lines that appear visible only when looked at through a light source, the texture of the paper; all of these are traits of true, genuine money. When a person knows what to look for in true currency, counterfeit money is relatively easy to identify. With just a little bit of training a person can very quickly and with good accuracy sort good money from bad money. The pastor's task is like that of the trainer: he is to train his church in the truth. When a church dwells upon the truth, knows the truth, loves the truth, all that is evil will stand out in stark contrast.

I belabour this point only because I have seen so many Christians who feel the best way to identify what is false is by dwelling on what is false. This is simply not truth. Live in the light and the darkness will be apparent.

Pastor: this is your task before God, to minister the Word faithfully and consistently so your church can display this fully mature Christian unity. Your task is to minister the Word so Christians not only know that God desires their maturity, but so they can actually attain it.

A Few Words on Application

It is my conviction that the best way you can model biblical thinking is through your preaching. If you preach those all-too-typical sermonettes for Christianettes, those moralistic sermons that begin with a passage of Scripture but very quickly go everywhere *but* Scripture, you are not modeling biblical thinking. By preaching a text, by wrestling with it to determine its meaning and then drawing fair and accu-

rate application from it, you are modeling biblical thinking--a kind of thinking that begins with Scripture and ends with mature Christian living. You are teaching your church to see that the Bible offers guidance on every area of doctrine and practice. If you neglect this, you are allowing your church to see the Bible as a book of wise sayings or fairy tales or fortune cookies; anything *but* the Word of God given for our good and his glory.

So preach the Word and do so verse-by-verse, book-by-book, teaching God's Word and drawing from it God's instruction for distinctly Christian living.

Another way you can model biblical thinking is to encourage your people to think for themselves. It is too easy, I think, to skip over the work of helping a person search the Scriptures on his own and give him only the end result. If a person has questions about what Scripture teaches on alcohol, the easy answer is to simply reply with your own understanding, even if it is one that is informed by Scripture. The better way is to help that person as he searches the Scriptures, looking for the Bible's teaching on this subject. You can then help him draw out conclusions and application based on what Scripture says. This was a challenge when I wrote a book on discernment—how do I teach the principles of discernment without simply giving people the end result?

I believe you also need to model spiritual discernment that is positive and uplifting rather than negative and detrimental. Do not feel that you need to respond to every wind of bad doctrine that blows through your church. Do not come to think that the pulpit is the place to respond to every challenge. Do not spend so much time researching what you know to be bad that you neglect to spend time studying what is good and pure and lovely and holy.

Just as when we spend times in self-examination we need to look once to ourselves and ten times to the cross, when we examine false doctrine we need to look far more often to what is true.

And finally, a word on how to understand if your church is growing in maturity, growing in discernment, growing in biblical thinking. It is often easier to examine your own doctrine, isn't it? After all, you are able to see into your own heart and your own mind and determine what is there. But when it comes to the people in your church, you need to rely on external evidence, you need to look to their lives to see how they really live. You need to test them by the commands of Scripture—those commands that tell us how we are to live in obedience before our God. I think of Romans 12 which begins by telling Christians to live lives that are transformed by the renewing of the mind; it tells Christians to have minds that are renewed so that by testing, by using biblical thinking, they are able to discern the will of God—those things that are good and acceptable and perfect. The next several chapters of Paul's letter explain what this looks like in the life of a Christian.

The overwhelming theme, of course, is love. A Christian is to love others through:

Gifts: Do the men and women of your church use their God-given gifts and abilities to serve the body of Christ? Do they use these gifts to build up the church, leading others to maturity?

Actions: Do the men and women of your church show love for all men and a particular love for the saints? Surely a person who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit will seek to be in the presence of other Christians who are also indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We should expect to see costly love and loving fellowship among the people of the church.

Submission: Do the men and women of your church live lives marked by submission to the God-given authorities? Do they understand that all authority is appointed by God and that resisting the authorities is, in effect, resisting God? Do they pray for the authorities, love the authorities, respect the authorities whether these are parents, pastors, employers or governments?

But, of course, love for men is not sufficient. A Christian is also to love God. Do we see that the people of your church are living lives marked by attentiveness to the word and dedication to prayer? Surely we would not expect them to mature in the faith without reliance on these means of grace. Do we see obedience in baptism and Lord's Supper? Do we see in them that desire to know God as he is so they can serve him as he desires them to?

Do you see such characteristics in the lives of the men and women of your church? Pastor: it is your task to lead your church from birth through infancy and into maturity. It is your task "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." Your church needs to grow up, your church needs to think biblically. God has charged you and equipped you to lead them there.