

MAY 3, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "Dogma and Deception" 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

This week we are going to look at something that is incredibly important in our present time. More and more there are voices in cultural, political, and other public arenas that are leveraging faith for various purposes. Many of these voices aren't faithfully using scripture in the process. This includes high profile, big voice preachers.

The scripture today is from the lectionary. As I read it, and in conjunction with the Bible study we are doing in 1 Timothy I had a vivid image in my mind that I couldn't shake.

The image in John is the Good Shepherd. People hear Jesus' voice and are led through the gate of life. And the idea is that there are other voices out there that are trying to lead by another way. Though in the end they can't make it through that gate of life because they haven't been true to Christ.

The image in my mind was the faithful in a kind of cattle chute going towards the gate. The phrase "enter by another way" is what stuck. I pictured these other voices hurdling over the wall of the chute and working in with the crowd. Their message mixes in and some are persuaded to listen. By the time it's time to get through that gate not only have the ones who cheated their way into the path turned away, sadly so are the ones who bought their message.

Peter's message that doing right and staying faithful can and will result in people causing problems for us rang strong. These voices are all around us and they are very persuasive. They tickle the right notes in our ears and put it in Jesus' name. So saying some of the things that I'm about to say don't go over well. Christians can turn ugly on one another very quickly if we hit on the right topic or nerve.

Yet in Timothy this is what Timothy is charged with doing in the first chapter. He is told to root out these teachings that don't fit with the genuineness of Christ's gospel. The reason given is that it's distracting people from the important message of the gospel. They aren't doing what they should because they are too drawn off by these other stories and twists on faith.

In today's world a big part of this is something called dogmas. Some I would argue are helpful. Others are very hurtful. Here is the definition of a dogma:

Dogma is a principle, belief, or set of tenets laid down by an authority (religious, political, or philosophical) as undeniably true and authoritative, often accepted without question or proof. It represents established, core assumptions, such as church doctrines or strict ideological beliefs.

The problem is that dogmas many times replace genuine understanding of scripture. Here's how it happens. The dogma is preached or instructed and believed. It becomes so central to faith that everything has to be squeezed to fit into it. That means if scripture doesn't support the dogma, scripture gets twisted or ignored. The dogma becomes important enough that it feels like questioning or dismantling it equals abandoning the faith altogether.

This is, of course, not true. That said, dogma infused teaching is everywhere. Spotting it is significant to be faithful believers and faithful citizens. It keeps us honest to make sure that Jesus is informing life, culture, and politics rather than the other way around.

What we are doing now is looking at some examples so you know what I'm talking about. We'll start easy.

The divinity of Christ and the Trinity: Both of these are core and central dogmas of the church. In order to support these we have to do some work with the words of Jesus Himself. We have to do some work to see a Trinity at work through all of scripture without being dishonest about scripture just to support it. That said,

Both of these are helpful foundations for us to grasp why our faith is what it is and to make sense of some of the language in scripture. The divinity of Jesus helps us have a greater appreciation for the gravity of the gospels. The drawback is it makes it hard to see the humanity of Jesus many times. Still, it is helpful most times. Likewise the Trinity. No one has a full grasp of exactly how all of it works. Most people explaining it end up contradicting their own ideas in the explanation because it is at its center a mystery. Yet we accept it and I think it gives us useful language to try and get a sense of the God we worship and is revealed in scripture.

Papal Infallibility: This is safe for Protestants because it's very much Catholic. It's the believe that the Pope doesn't make a mistake so what he says goes. Hard line Catholics take the Pope as the end of the line in terms of discussion. Throughout history this has led to some good things and bad. The problem is that if scripture disagrees with the Pope, this dogma forces scripture to have to twist to support the Pope, not the other way

around.

Divine Right: This one affects Protestants as well. It is the belief that whomever is in power over a kingdom, nation, etc. is put in place by God and therefore to be followed. If they call for something, God must be willing it. Once again, this causes major issues when the leader is doing and calling for things that fall outside of the example and witness of Christ. When that happens to believe this dogma forces scripture to twist, bend, or be dismissed to squeeze into the box of whomever is in power.

Pastoral Anointing: This is similar to Divine right and is also a Protestant invention. In Samuel, David has the chance to kill King Saul and says he won't "stretch forth his hand" against "God's anointed". This has been misused in some traditions to say that the pastor is God's appointed leader and isn't to be challenged or even spoken poorly of. That is "stretching out the hand against God's anointed."

You have likely heard of or can at least imagine the gross abuses of authority pastors have used in the name of this dogma. And like the Pope, in these traditions what the pastor says is taken as law. If scripture disagrees, the pastor doesn't change. The congregation and leadership twists the Bible to squeeze into the pastor's box of ideas and beliefs.

Now trust me, this is tempting. I know the smack that gets talked about me behind my back. It would be great to instill in a church that no one can talk trash about me and just has to do what I say because God is "inspiring me".

But neither this nor divine right nor papal infallibility are correct. They are Biblically wrong. They are recipes for disaster. All through scripture there are examples and warnings about listening to the convenient, comfortable, self-absorbed voices of leaders and other people over the voice of God. And that voice is most clearly revealed in Jesus Christ.

What is most honest in today's world is that these dogmas are very convenient for most I think. They are held as long as we agree with the person in charge. If I like what they are saying then I want everyone to toe the line. If I don't suddenly that leader is a tool of the devil and we need to "disobey" and all the smack talk in the world is fair game.

But we can't know what we may be falling into if we're not even aware of what we're looking at. Naming it helps.

Destruction of God's Enemies: This is a dogma that is very Old Testament and "Revelationary". You can find support for destruction and even genocide of those who are considered the "enemy of God" or at least the "enemy of God's people." This is especially present today in Christian hatred of Muslims. Or harsh attitudes towards folks who embody any of a handful of views that some Christians disagree with. These are the "enemies of God" and I literally hear advocating for wiping them all out or wishing for death and disaster to befall them.

This in the heart of anyone with hands of significant levers of influence is dangerous.

It's also not Jesus. Not the Jesus of the gospels. We just looked at this not long ago. We're not supposed to hate and/or destroy "enemies". We are supposed to love them. AND our job is to persuade them to share in the faith that we have accepted. When the disciples asked if they should destroy people they'd preached to and had rejected them Jesus was clear. NO! When Peter cut off the ear of the servant in the Garden he was told to drop the blade because to live by the sword is to die by it.

Not a shred of the gospels supports this dogma Yet you can hear it weekly without hardly any effort in digging online. The dogma is dangerous.

Prosperity is a sign of solid faith: This many of you have heard at some point. The idea that God will bless you with wealth and prosperity if your faith is strong. The stronger the faith, the more the prosperity. This works really well for the preachers of this dogma. They can convince their followers, and there are many, to cough up large amounts of money attaching it to a "sign of their faith". The preacher gets richer, or the corporation posing as a church gets richer, and when the congregation doesn't see a return the loophole is that the giver's faith isn't strong enough or they have some undisclosed sin in their life.

It also wipes the conscience of the rich and powerful because obviously whatever they are doing is right with God because they have a huge bank account and comfortable life.

Once again, for this to work scripture is twisted over and over again to squeeze into this box. Somehow we have to make scripture about a poor, wandering rabbi who warned over and over against the dangers of focusing on wealth. Who told his followers to expect persecution and hardship. Who called on people to give sacrificially. Fit into a box that is ultimately supporting hoarding wealth, blaming poverty on the faith of the poor, and seeing God as a banking investment rather than Christ as the Lord we must follow with a humble servant's heart putting others before ourselves.

Any nation is God's nation: This mistakes patriotism for faith. Believing that my country is God's favorite suddenly switches priority. Now I have permission to go along with whatever I think is giving my nation a leg up,

whether it suits Christ or not. If I am strong in this dogma, I twist faith to squeeze into the box of my patriotism rather than calling on my patriotism to be unwavering in its faithfulness. I think the picture is pretty clear but if you want to look through history remember that those first religious settlers coming to the New World saw themselves as God's new chosen and the New World as the new promised land. That simple dogma, not supported by anything Biblical, gave them permission to commit terrible atrocities and believe they were justified by their faith.

These dogmas are all around us. They aren't often put as bluntly as I have this morning. If they were they'd be less persuasive and certainly not as able to manipulate. And of course there are more out there. The beliefs however are present all throughout different forms of Christianity in different ways.

My hope is that in this you have learned a few things you might not have known before. My hope is that all of us knowing what is out there are better equipped to steer clear when these dogmas are creeping in. Whether it's a preacher, teacher, athlete, musician, actor, or politician that's working faith into their agendas being alert is critical.

There's a reason Christianity is so useful to people who create cults. It's persuasive and calls for significant loyalty to live our faith out with integrity. Peppering self serving dogmas that become an essential part of people's core faith becomes hidden in kernels of truth. When the dogma is attractive it's even more persuasive.

One of the things that I hear over and over again from folks who have bought into these dogmas over and above a genuine example of Jesus is regret. They regret the time lost. The mistakes made. They regret the fallout in their own lives. Many times even more they regret the fallout caused in the lives of others.

I can tell you without reservation that the words of John and the advice to Timothy are worth living into. It's worth it to know the genuine Jesus of the gospels so that we can hear His voice. When we hear His voice follow it. It means we might have to say "no" to some attractive ideas. It also means what we say "yes" to stays on that path that leads to the gateway of life. It means that the footprint we leave in this world points the world and those in it towards Christ. It builds up. It elevates. It unites.

Every one of us can heed the call of Timothy. We can spot the twists on faith that lead away from Jesus. When we are speaking with people in our own personal orbits we can take on that role of helping sort through it themselves. We keep one another accountable to staying on that straight and narrow path. You will see and know people I will never meet.

People are hungry for Christianity that does away with the dogma and reveals the fullness of Jesus in the world. I see it. I hear about it. I read about it. We can be that presence and build this community of faith into a greater, even more thriving place where people of all stripes can gather in the name, presence, and power of the Christ that transforms hearts and lives. Be a shepherd called to the foundation of faith that Timothy was called to. In the doing lead the way to the Good Shepherd that heals and gives life here and life everlasting.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Timothy 3

In this chapter we get at the heart of what many refer to when talking about the "pastoral letters" of Paul. Essentially it is talking about qualities or qualifications of leaders. There are several positions/offices/roles listed in this passage. Before getting bogged down in defining these roles we must acknowledge something.

Our grasp of words like bishop, deacon, elder, and so forth aren't consistent from denomination to denomination. All of these roles are some form of leadership but to different extents. Bishops cover different degrees of territory and have differing degrees of authority over pastors in their care. Deacons similarly. For example in some denominations deacons are appointed within a congregation for a time and a serving duty. In others it is a formal office that requires a denominational stamp of approval.

Different groups have different rules about what responsibilities an office may perform. Some have boundaries on who can perform a baptism, a wedding, a funeral, serve communion, etc. For some the idea of "ordination" is very significant and requires years on years of diligent training, assessment, and interviewing. Or you can go online, fill out an application and for \$50 print out your ordination certificate in ten minutes.

The point here is that these qualities are a good reference point, yet we have to recognize that the modern church has made leadership and entirely different beast. And that's part of the problem in my opinion.

Looking through the better part of this chapter something jumps out quite glaringly. There is really nothing suggested that is out of bounds as a requirement for someone in leadership. That said, these aren't traits that are reserved only for leadership. To a characteristic they should be the goal of every single believer. The question was asked in one of our studies whether these requirements still apply today. That was our conclusion. Yes, they do and they go beyond just people wanting to be leaders. They are for all.

Of note is that many of the requirements involve temperament. There is a sense that there is a reason for this. It may well have been that there was concern in Ephesus that people would have coercive, bullying men

talities. That wouldn't do for someone leading in a church. This mentality is destructive in general, how much more it would destroy the spirit required in a congregation.

An issue with this lies in the sense of control. On one hand the idea that a leader should have control over their household makes a lot of sense. On the surface. Go a little deeper and depending on the issues in a home that can lead to some behavior that is actually not desired. If someone is afraid that any issue might raise eyebrows suddenly there can be pressure to rule with an iron fist. This is a fast gateway to abusive attitudes within the home in order to have everyone under the thumb.

This has persisted into many pastoral families even today. It's no secret that pastors "live in a fishbowl". For many this pressure pushes the pastor to become very controlling and paranoid about the public image of their spouse and children. They fear that any misstep will reflect on themselves and their ministry. Sadly in many cases they are correct. Which isn't fair.

Pastors are people, just like anyone else and so are their families. Today we have other understandings that the didn't back then. We understand that there are physical and mental illnesses that can wreak havoc in a family. It's no one's fault per se. Most try to sort it out as best they can and white knuckle it until they figure out the best means to manage circumstances.

Still, that pressure for "public image" does persist in many places. That passage to "have a good reputation among outsiders" also carries weight.

We also find ourselves in a place and time where image many times is more important than substance and reality. I have known people who have worked for/with some big name preachers and religious organizations. The image is clean and they say some right things from the pulpit. Behind the scenes though... There is bad tempers, verbal abuse, overworking staff to the bone in the name of "sacrifice", and expecting lots of free volunteer work while the headliner is raking in the cash.

We live in the day of non disclosure agreements. Literally many large corporate churches require them for volunteers and staff. Why? Because they know that much of what happens behind closed doors is problematic and wrong. Once someone sees behind the curtain they don't want that coming to the public eye so they legally bind people to keep their mouths shut.

In essence, all of these traits in this chapter are good and correct. Sadly like many things over time people have found a way to work around the expectations in order to build larger organizations and images. Even sadder is that those willing to compromise tend to get further ahead than the ones who do not.

While that is one side of the caution, there is another. As congregations shrink there can be a desperation to fill leadership positions. This can lead to asking any new face to jump in just to have a fresh, warm body in the role. The practice is not advisable. It is wise to prove personalities and character in order to ensure that the ones leading "the flock" are solid and qualified "shepherds". There are horror stories aplenty from where this policy and due diligence haven't been followed.

Ultimately the heart of asking these things of people is a love for the congregation. Paul wants to make sure that these people, especially new believers, are treated with care, integrity, and in a way that will uplift and grow their faith and witness. A large part of that is expecting those in leadership to have a tested character that reflects a genuine faith as well as a spirit and attitude suited towards guiding a congregation.

The chapter trails out with a wise word from the writer. He doesn't know if he will be delayed. We don't know why. We do know that there are many factors that could get in the way of a timely arrival including things like jail, death, or some kind of major travel hiccup (remember Paul himself was shipwrecked). The letter is also intended to make sure that the church has marching orders in the writer's absence.

This is great future planning. The writer knows he won't be around forever. The church can't be reliant on his presence. It has to function on its own. Setting expectations is one foundational aspect of ensuring that they can.

It ends with a hymn. Reactions to what exactly it intends in our studies was mixed. We wonder if it was a hymn what the tune might have been!

Something to keep in mind when a hymn is inserted is purpose. A hymn isn't a prophecy, nor is it history, nor is it necessarily literal. It is poetry that is designed to elicit an emotion. Many times it is encouragement and comfort. The question is what the feel it is adding to the letter in addition to whatever theology the hymn might have communicated to the early church.

For me, this chapter is just a reminder that as much as we have statements of faith that we feel are important to believe and incorporate that isn't the end of faith. Faith is lived. It is a center that expresses itself in every word and deed in our lives. In other words there is "fruit." If I want to know how real my faith is it's often less about how much scripture I can recite. It's revealed in where the rubber meets the road of my life. What has it done for my character? How has it changed the way I relate to the world around me? How does the faith I profess in Jesus result in my life looking more like His?