

Title The Major Decision (2 Timothy 1:12-14)
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I want to thank you brethren for the opportunity to serve, surrounded by men like you. [pause] Just think about leaving your congregation for a minute. [pause] Praise God for providing the church for us. The text is II Timothy 1:12-14. What is this decision that we are faced with? It's one that the church has faced since the very beginning. What will we do with the Gospel that has been entrusted to us? As was already mentioned, somebody's comment, "Do we make the Gospel fit us, or do we fit ourselves to the Word of God?" That's the major decision. It's the decision that faces us today. It's the decision we'll face tomorrow and the generation that comes after us, and the next, as the Lord tarries. What are we going to do with what God has given us? Paul is referring to the fact that he was appointed a teacher and apostle--"for the which cause, because I was appointed a preacher, I also suffered these things. Nevertheless I'm not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed... Hold fast the form of sound words... [read verses]". I don't know what the *things* are referring to. We happen to see him in prison. He talks about the affliction of the Gospel. But he says, I'm not ashamed of what has been entrusted of me, and I am not ashamed of that. Essentially—Timothy, I don't want you to be ashamed of it either. Hold fast to it; keep it. Guard it. Keep your eye on it. Watch over it so it doesn't get away. Keep it safe. His warning, that there is danger to the Gospel. Not that the Gospel itself will ever change, but the way people are given the Gospel. Keep an eye on it, guard it. What is it? I use the term *gospel*, but he calls it, that good thing, and a form of sound words. It's what we've been given by God. It doesn't say keep the sound words, but keep the form of sound words. As Robert asked in the workshop, "Is it okay to have practical application?" That's what Paul's talking about. The way the sound words are lived out. Keep the form of it, the expression of it, the example of it; and in doing so, you will keep the sound word. We face the need to guard the Gospel, and all that it means, *and the forms*, the expressions, the example of that. Without losing it by simply letting it go or by having it just becoming something empty. How do we do that with something as precious as these words?

Do you think you're not strong enough, big enough, smart enough to guard it? By the Holy Ghost which dwells in us. The very presence of God is going to help us guard and keep what is true. That's even in a deeper-sense than God took care of Jeremiah, because He's not just dwelling along side of us, but within us. We don't have to do this alone, in our own strength. Even all of us together do not have the strength to keep the Gospel with our own strength. We may not attempt to keep the Gospel in our own strength. If we do, we'll become Pharisees. If we

try to do it in our own strength, we deny the very Gospel. Let's not forget that. Let's not forget, that if this is what we're doing in-and-of-ourselves, we're denying what we're trying to keep, and what we want to preserve.

I want to talk a little about what it means—to keep and hold fast the truth. And also some particulars about what we need to give attention to, and talk about what we leaders should do to take up responsibility. Last Sunday morning we had communion in our church. In less than two weeks, we had a baptism, ordination, and communion service. During the communion service, we had quite a number of visitors, probably 30 or 40. I felt responsible to mention that we observe closed communion—that we serve communion to those who are members of our congregation. A man from the community (who had been attending for a number of months) got up and walked out offended. Some of the problem was our fault—my fault, not communicating more clearly ahead of time. He was also very clear that the problem that he has with what I shared was a fundamental problem.: “That is not what we should do.” Is closed communion a cultural practice causing unnecessary offense? Is there a way we can do this to make a man like him feel more comfortable with it? Another young lady, who had been a member for a number of years, and left with an appreciation for where we are at, also expressed concern that there is too much that is unnecessary, culture, which includes for her, in her outworking, she is this point isn't going to wear a head covering anymore. Are we so culturally bound that people can't find the Gospel in how we live and operate as a congregation? I thought Tim Stoltzfus covered this issue very well. I want to give a few more thoughts on this thing of our cultural background.

There are some things heavily influenced by our Swiss-German-European roots, and I'll mention two of them: cap-style covering for sisters, straight cut coat for brethren. I want to call attention to what Tim said this morning: Tell me how many subcultures there are in America that have been as directly and heavily influenced by a deep commitment to obey this Word. Very few. Very few. Most subcultures develop for other reasons. Yes, we have the cap-style covering as being common among us because something like it was the norm in Europe in the 16th century. Christians and non-Christians alike. But, we've kept that same covering when other subcultures dropped it because we believe the Bible teaches something about that. We were given the straight cut suit coat by European culture. Another non-Mennonite told me, he'd like to have a European style coat like me. “Where can I get it?” But we've kept it for the principles of modesty and separation in dress, and a few others reasons, too. As we think about this issue of change and what we're going to do with the truth and how the truth has been packaged for us, this form of sound words that we also have along with the sound words: will what replaces it be equally Biblically or more Biblical? Is that not where we want to go?

I'm not going to ask for a raise of hand, but how many of you are in genealogy? There's ways that can be sinful: the Bible talks about endless genealogies. But it also reflects our deep commitment to togetherness and community. I know that some folks who are the first generation into our subculture—now we're some second, third, fourth, fifth, even more into this subculture—and those who are first generation, obviously the first generation finds it more difficult to figure it all out. Sometimes this thing of genealogy feels threatening. Your last name is such and such. Hm. Where do you fit in? Tell me about your background? Where are you from? That can be perceived as the question, “Do you fit?” Well, obviously, no, you don't fit, but that's not the question that is being asked. The question is how you fit? Not do you, we believe

you can, and you do fit. We want to fit you in, but we need to know you, so we can fit you in. Knowing—a part of knowing—is knowing where you are coming from. It's a statement that your identity as an individual, whether you're a Yoder or one of these Haitian last names, your identity is bigger than you as an individual. We want to know about that to be able to include you well. That's countercultural in America today. Today, you are what you are in-the-here-and -now. I don't want you to know about my background or parents: just take me as I am, right here, right now. That's not me, that's not you. That's one of the things it ought to mean to us, we want to know you. We don't care what your background is, that's not going to determine whether you fit. It's going to help us know how you fit. We believe that where you come from is part of what is shaping you. Whether it started being born into a third generation Beachy Amish family or whether it started being born who knows where?

Even volleyball is a sport of choice for many of our youth groups. Think about that. That's one of the team sports (there are others, but it's one of them) that gives more opportunity for widespread participation regardless of skill or ability or inability, as well as its simplicity in the amount of equipment and facilities that are required to engage in it. I'm convinced that one of the reasons that this is the sport of choice in our subculture is because intuitively, unconsciously, we make decisions based on some principles, from the Bible. Our subculture is committed to obedience, and it shapes every aspect of our lives. Let's appreciate that. I'm not ashamed of the Gospel. We need to be—as we think about changes and we need to think about it—to be concerned with what we are moving from. We're going to make a shift, and put something in its place, what is it going to be? We WILL have a culture, and we WILL have a subculture. We will be one. Typically, if we begin to absorb another subculture, this generation, my generation here, evangelical culture has been the subculture of choice, if we're going to lay aside the form of sound words that we have given. We need to be asking the question, if what is replacing is more Biblical.

Christianity Today had an interesting article commenting on some of the novels that have been written on Amish life. Seen any of those around recently? Incidentally, they concluded that there is only one—a new one from Good Books—is the only one worth reading. In the course of that article, he mused over the question that some of these articles seem to be hitting the Amish hard for this cage in which the Amish are all trapped. He mused on the question whether the Amish are the ones who are in the cage or is it the evangelicals that are in the cage? Who's in the cage? That's an evangelical asking that. He concluded later on in the article by making the observation that—whatever the case—the Amish have been able to protect themselves from the very things which are poisoning evangelicals today. Think about that. Unfortunately, as Dave so aptly pointed out with the Emerging Church that we are in danger of being poisoned by many of the same things poisoning the evangelicals.

So what are some of the areas that we're in danger of that we have to pay attention to, to guard, and to keep against? It's not an all-inclusive list, and has been modified over the past few days as different brethren have talked about different things. I'm giving this to you from my perspective. This is not the sound words. It's not the Word of God--it's just my perspective. I'll try to explain what I mean and trust it is based on these sound words. Anabaptists were cross-centered, Dave Nisly mentioned yesterday. The Cross must be central. The Protestants, when they talk about the Cross, they believe the Cross is central today, but in a limited sense compared to how we see it.

For them, the focus on the Christian life centers on being born again, and the Cross is at the center of that--the death on the Cross for our sin. But for us, the Christian life includes and begins with being born again, but Jesus' death and His resurrection are for the here-and-now. We are raised in the new birth by the resurrection of Jesus Christ to newness of life. So, the Christian life is centered on the whole life. We say that the Cross is central, not vertically, *horizontally*. The cross is not just about the death of Christ, but the death and resurrection in giving me the new life, gives the power and desire to die.

As we see it, there are no wimpy Christians. We commit ourselves to death. You do that. We require that of every person who is baptized to say, "Yes, I will be faithful unto death. I will live, renouncing the world and the devil [of course], *and my own carnal will and sinful desires*." Are we willing to continue to accept the offense of the Gospel? To take up the Cross? Not just the offense of those who disagree with us and saying we're wrong. The Gospel isn't all inclusive. The Gospel isn't at all tolerant. It's going to drive some people away. Not that they won't hear, but it's going to drive some people away. The Gospel loves sinners, loves sinners, but will not tolerate sin. The Gospel calls for either/or, and our culture insists on both/and.

The claims of Jesus for salvation are exclusive. There are some in, and some out. It demands an exclusive obedience. Obedience to Christ and none other. No other loves. No other gods before me. So in the taking up of the Cross, the most significant offense of the Gospel is the one that I feel in my own flesh rising up against the Gospel. The suffering that comes from the battle with my own will, my own sinful desires, the desires that are in contrast to the will and the desires of Christ. It's one thing to talk about battling the world, another thing in fighting the devil and the wrong ideas out there, but I tell you what, if there is not in the call a call to discipleship, a call to do battle with myself in relationship to God, to do battle with myself in relation to other people, and with those fleshly desires, then we are left with a wimpy, empty, Christianity. If we can't do battle with ourselves, and submit ourselves in spite of whatever it is we want to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we have a form of godliness, but no power. The power of God in my life is realized when I by the Holy Ghost and the working of Christ, overcomes me and surrenders me. That reaffirms, every day, every moment, every time that happens, that reaffirms that He is Lord. I'm afraid that we are losing that awareness that our most significant battle is with ourselves.

We need to remember that our souls will be condemned to eternal Hell if we lose that battle. The Cross is the daily reality to us. It's not some memento upon the wall. It's something that demands my whole life, not just theoretically, but very practically, in my relationship with you, in my relationship with my customers, employees, and children. Also in the choices I make in this and this and that—do I follow the Bible? Am I establishing a form of these sound words, and living this out? Really and truly? Or am I not?

So why do we have closed communion? Because communion, for us, is not just a remembrance of Christ and I've been saved; it's a remembrance of what Christ *is* doing in you and in our relationship with one another. We stand and confess with one another, today—not based on something in the past—but daily that I'm in a right relationship with God, and I confess with you today, I'm in the right relationship with my fellow man, that Christ's death is working now. It's like how the holy kiss was described. It's too intimate; it's too closely connected to the brothers and sisters that I rub shoulders with. It doesn't mean they're not fit for it. There were some folks

there Sunday that were members of some of your congregations. That's not the reason they're not invited to participate, it wasn't any judgment at all—this was our family time.

Another issue: I've chosen to put one word down: "vanity." Following after the world in relation to appearance. A person not willing to appear separated is (if they are not already there) is going to end up being unwilling to be separated in anything else. I believe it's important for us to continue to draw lines and generate discussion of separation, rather than down the line, at that point rather than later on; because if you don't draw the line at that point, you won't down the road. Don't make provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof. The issue of personal appearance ties into that. I think of veilings. We see (and I'm talking about the wider church) veilings becoming not veilings anymore. Head coverings are just a decoration. It's worn with the same motivations that motivated American women in the early 20th century to wear a hat. It was a matter of propriety, not Bible. I'm sure you've heard the question whether wearing the veiling is a salvation issue? Wrong question, wrong question. Is obedience a salvation issue? We don't wear the covering because it is going to save us but because God said to. If you love me, you'll do what I say. It comes back to that Great Commandment. We do these things because we love God.

I think the discussion on B-A-Men on the "ribband blue" is worthy of continued discussion. The easy-believing, we're influenced by that more than we suspect sometimes. Maybe it's just our humanity. Holiness is less significant than relationship. Let's talk about that in relationship to God. Relationship with God is more important than a persona of holiness. What people really mean in a relation with God is something mystical, something like the Pietists would talk about, something inside I know I've got. But we must remember that it is holiness that gives us that deepening relationship with God. Why do I say that? That's a mouthful. I'm not talking about holiness that saves us or changes us initially. I'm talking about the holiness that results from that change. It's the pursuit of holiness in what God expects, and the way God expects us to pursue that holiness—that produces a real relationship with Him. Laban referred to it when he spoke about confession and repentance. Somebody realizes that they cannot be holy and must cry out to God for mercy. They realize that if they're going to obey God, it's going to be the work of God. They come before God in that way, you think their relationship with God isn't growing, deepening, and becoming more real? You remove the pursuit of holiness out of the relationship with God, and I'm going to be so bold to suggest that if it stays that way, you remove the possibility of a deep relationship with God. To try to pursue a relationship with God apart from a pursuit of holiness produces spiritual weaklings, and leads to disillusionment and eventual rejection of Christianity for something that is more consistent. I can pursue my own way and live on my own, and be consistent in that, but I can't pursue a relationship with God and find any measure of satisfaction and depth and holiness, unless it comes out of my dependence on God to make me what I long to be, what he wants me to be.

Marvin mentioned about the inch deep theology for Christians in Asia, but we're faced with that in America. Try to keep track of popular Christian music. I'll leave that as an example. Those Bethany House novels I've referred to. What book will we get our interest? What are we absorbed in? Are we satisfied with a knee-deep relationship with God? A Protestant historian evaluated the historians in the 19th century. They said [*read, they strove after holiness rather than talk about beliefs*]. He was a European Protestant. The reason the law went after the

Anabaptists and punished them with death, torture, banishment, and confiscation was not because of what they believed or their baptism, but because the Anabaptist ethic—the way they lived—was considered to be a danger to the existing social order. That's a translation from the German. They were killed because they were threatening the current culture. They were living at odds with the existing culture.

Just a few other concerns: School curricula. I believe that we leaders are amiss if we continue to allow our schools to continue using non-Anabaptist school curriculum. There's no curricula that is so good that is worth the risk of undermining sound doctrine. [*Holds up Bible*] We need to evaluate our curriculum by the Scripture.

Bible versions. Give me a translation that gives me as near as I can comfortably read the words of God. There are different kinds of modern translations. Some make a serious attempt to translate the Word, and others make an attempt to translate the ideas, thoughts and meanings. What do we believe is inspired by God? We believe the words are inspired, we don't have those documents in front of us, but we believe the inspiration of God rested on every word. So give me a translation that tries to give me the words. Some of you wrote letters to your girlfriend. What did she want to read? Suppose you didn't speak the same language. Does she want to read the translation of your thoughts, or the words? Give me the words, I'll figure out what he meant. I want every word. The NIV is coming out with what is now a thought-to-thought translation which makes our modern-culture okay. They are openly saying that. It's no longer word-for-word.

Individualism. I appreciate what was said about the intimacy about the holy kiss. Community based on good fellowship is shallow. Community that is based on commitment and submission to one another is going to be deeper. What I am willing to sacrifice for, takes priority for me. The more I sacrifice myself for you, the deeper I bond, the stronger our relationship. True love involves sacrifice; if it doesn't involve sacrifice, it's not love. You have the world's idea of love. We call our people to sacrifice for the church and the future, to submit to one another in the fear of God.

Separation of church and state. We need to reject the evangelical influence. What do I care if the 10 Commandments are posted on a courtroom wall. It's nice that people have a chance to read it, but it's a situation where some of the folks breaking the Ten Commandments are holding other people to them and not repenting of it. Why should we promote the idea of an ungodly principal or school student praying a prayer that means nothing, to other people who are also ungodly? It's nice that God is brought to people's attention but what really does it accomplish for the Kingdom. We withhold our vote, we moderate our opinions because we are committed to let the world be the world and the church be the church, and our role is not to tame the other kingdom and help the other kingdom do better, but our goal is to snatch people out of it. We're the guerilla fighters, operating behind enemy lines. Do you think of yourself that way? In kingdom reality, that's you, trying to rescue the soldiers of the enemy from destruction. We don't have time to waste on worrying whether or not the world makes an acknowledgement of God. It is not unto salvation.

As for the push of technology: if we're not willing to make some hard decisions, we're going to

be destroyed. Technology is not innocent. It does not determine things, but it definitely shapes the values, the way we look at things, and the way we function. It shapes the form. I'll leave it at that.

We as ministers have responsibilities to guard the truth and call ourselves to account. No, not everyone that says Lord, Lord is going to enter the kingdom—but He that doeth the will of my Father in heaven. If we're as narrow-minded as Jesus on that point, we're going to have to acknowledge that it is not just those out there that are going to be sent into outer darkness. If there's anyone in here—our churches—that is not doing the will of the Father, that's what they're living out, then they also will be lost. That's what motivates our church discipline and brotherhood accountability. That's what awakens us to our responsibility. It's not God's will that any will perish, but that all will come to repentance. If our will aligns with God's will, then it's not our will that anyone should perish.

An Amish man wrote a letter to Donald Kraybill about his book about forgiveness after the Nickel Mines shooting. This is part of what he said, "I was glad to see how you stressed that we are also human and struggle with this issue of forgiveness. We struggle to forgive on a daily basis. The thought came to mind that this generation cannot claim credit for our attitude on forgiveness, being as it was the result of our heritage, but we surely can be blamed if it is not passed on to the next generation." What's he saying? We have been taught from generations past, it's been given to us that you do what God said. So if God says forgive in the face of the most heinous crimes that deeply impact us personally, we still might struggle on a daily basis. We know that we must forgive and so we do. It's for us to be concerned about that the next generation is the same too. May we have the courage to lead our people in that way. We acknowledge failure. We acknowledge weakness. We acknowledge that we falter but we continue to make it a daily, active, life-long pursuit to become more and more like Jesus Christ. How do we know what that is? Live like this [Bible]. Unto the doctrine, continue in them. Continuing in the doctrine, in so doing, thou shalt save thyself and those that hear. "My Anchor Holds." "Rise Up O Men."

Something that Menno Simons wrote: what change it was for him in his preaching and ministry after his conversion and I'm going to read it off and I would like it up on the screen to ponder. ... *[read quote.]* "I began in the name of the Lord to preach publicly from the pulpit the Word of true prentice, to direct the people unto the narrow path and with the power of the Scriptures to reprove all sin and ungodliness, all idolatry and false worship, and to testify to the true worship, also baptism and the Lord's Supper according to the teaching of Christ, to the extent that I at that time had received grace from God."