

GUARD THE TEACHING

by Ray C. Stedman

The Apostle Paul's two letters to Timothy, together with his letter to Titus, are often called the "Pastoral Epistles." This is appropriate, in one sense, because these letters were written to young pastors who were involved in the leadership of churches. They constitute, therefore, a kind of handbook for pastors. But I prefer to call the letters the "Filials," rather than the "Pastorals," because *filial* has to do with sonship, and that is what Timothy and Titus were -- sons in the faith of the Apostle Paul. He had led them both to Christ. They were very dear to him, and they had shared many hardships with him on his journeys around the Roman Empire.

In this first letter to Timothy (whom he had left at the church at Ephesus), Paul is giving him counsel and guidance on how to conduct himself in the leadership of that church. The two letters to Timothy have been very difficult for scholars to identify as to the time of their writing. Nothing that Paul refers to in them fits into the history recorded in the book of Acts. Some, therefore, have doubted that Paul even wrote them. Most scholars are now agreed, however, that these are the last letters to come from Paul's hand.

The book of Acts closes with Paul imprisoned in a hired house in Rome, where he stayed for two years. Luke suggests that Paul was released from there, and many scholars feel that after his release from that first imprisonment, Paul traveled with Timothy and Titus around the Roman Empire before going into the East again. He left Titus on the island of Crete to guide the emerging church there, and he brought Timothy on to Ephesus with him where there already was a church that had been long established. The apostle then left Timothy in Ephesus while he himself traveled on up to Macedonia.

Many think that Paul went from there to Spain, and perhaps even to Britain. At any rate, after the apostle had left Timothy, he was subsequently arrested and re-imprisoned in Rome, this time very likely in the Mamertine Prison. In that cold, dark hole, the apostle wrote the second letter to Timothy. Shortly thereafter, as far as tradition tells us, Paul was beheaded on the Ostian Way, outside Rome. These letters, therefore, come from the close of the apostle's ministry. They were written to someone who was very dear to Paul's heart, who was very closely involved with him in the ministry. So we begin the First Letter of Paul to Timothy, a beautiful letter from a father to a beloved son who is undertaking a demanding and dangerous work.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

To Timothy, my true child in the faith:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain in Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, ... {1 Tim 1:1-3 RSV}

Verse one sounds a bit formal. Paul identifies himself as "an apostle," but surely Timothy knew that already. It hardly seems necessary for Paul to remind Timothy of his apostolic authority and function. But when you consider the nature of the church at Ephesus you can see why Paul begins in this rather formal way.

The church there was under severe attack. Paul had said this would happen. The 20th chapter of Acts tells of Paul's last recorded visit to Ephesus where, from the port of Miletus, he called to him the elders of the church at Ephesus. In that 20th chapter there is a marvelous, beautiful word of farewell to these elders from the apostle. In the midst of it, in Verse 29, he says to them:

"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves [i.e., from among the eldership] will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." {Acts 20:29-30 RSV}

This was written before Timothy was left at Ephesus. Evidently, these conditions the apostle had anticipated had already come into being. The church was under attack from "fierce wolves from without," and "perverse teachers from within." Therefore, it needed an apostle's authority. Now, Timothy was not sent to Ephesus as a bishop or as an elder. (There were already elders at the church there -- the men whom Paul had addressed in Chapter 20 of Acts.) Rather, Timothy was sent as an apostolic representative, that is, as Paul's substitute, as a bridge from the days of the apostolic leadership of the early church to the more permanent leadership of eldership oversight, guided by the Scriptures, as the Lord intended. The New Testament Scriptures had not yet been written. Timothy, therefore, as the representative of the apostle, constituted the source of scriptural revelation to the church at Ephesus, as the Apostle Paul himself had done.

(In our time, the written Word of God has taken the place of these apostolic representatives. From the 1st century on, the church has been guided and guarded by the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, recorded in the Scriptures.)

Verse 2 in a very warm and human verse: "To Timothy, my true child in the faith." There is an affectionate reminder of their relationship. And here is an insightful blessing from the heart of the apostle: "Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." Usually, Paul's salutation was only, "Grace and peace." But here, and in the Second Letter to Timothy, he includes the word, *mercy*. I think this was because of Timothy's fears. Mercy is God's grace exercised in deliverance from circumstances, and that is what Timothy needed. Timothy was a fearful, reticent young man -- an introvert, we would say today. But he had a demanding task and a great opportunity. He needed the assurance that God could deliver him, so Paul blesses him with this additional word, "mercy from God the Father."

In Verses 1-11 the apostle tells Timothy what his work in Ephesus would involve. (We are not going to look at all of this this morning; we will just take a portion of it.) But in essence, it was two things:

- First, Timothy was to stop certain teaching that was going on in Ephesus; and
- Second, he was to make clear how to use the Law of Moses in the Christian life -- the lawful use of the Law.

These very important matters have great relevance for us as well; they are fantastically helpful when we understand them. Therefore, we are going to take our time through this letter and try to understand clearly what the apostle had in mind for the church in Ephesus, as he also had in mind for the church in Palo Alto.

The first thing the apostle told Timothy to do was to challenge certain teachers. Verse 3:

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith. Certain persons by swerving from these have wandered away from into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions. {1 Tim 1:3-7 RSV}

It is highly significant that the first task the apostle set Timothy to doing in Ephesus was to guard the teaching of the church. "Charge certain persons that they must not teach differing doctrines," he says. In other words, the teaching is the most important aspect of the ministry of a church. It must be kept pure and unsullied.

As someone has well put it, "The main thing is to see that the main thing remains the main thing."

The central task of leadership in any church is to see that the teaching is in line with the apostolic revelation, the word about Jesus -- which Paul summarizes in these terms in Verse 11 of this first chapter, "the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted." That is the body of teaching to which a church should give itself. There are many other subjects that are right for Christians to pursue (the Scriptures

encourage us to pursue various dimensions and divisions of human knowledge), but when you come to the church there is one body of teaching, and only one.

The church exists to declare this unique body of truth. Anything that differs is not to be taught in church. Now this does not mean that many in the congregation will not have things they are struggling with.

I have always thought it a mistake to ask brand new Christians to sign a doctrinal statement. How can they sign something they say they believe when they have not yet understood or even studied it? So there may be people in a congregation who are at various stages of doctrinal understanding. But when it comes to teaching, that teaching must be clear and straight and true, and according to the apostolic witness. That is the first thing Timothy is charged to do: Stop the teaching that is different, and oppose these wrong concepts.

This does not mean that these teachers were blatant heretics. They were not. They were probably men from the congregation who, in many ways, were good teachers, but they were beginning to introduce ideas that were derived, basically, from human philosophy. The scholars are divided as to whether this was a Greek form of philosophy, which later developed into what was called *Gnosticism* (which became widespread in the church in the early centuries), or whether these were Jewish philosophies.

Personally, I would lean toward the latter, because of Verses 6 and 7, where these men are said to be "longing to be teachers of the law." If this is the case, these teachers were suggesting Jewish fables, myths and genealogies, here in the church at Ephesus.

It is essential that there be unity in the teaching of a church. There are differences of style that are quite permissible; there are different gifts (they are expected to vary) among teachers; there are different choices of subjects of the revelation of God. The heart of truth, however, must remain unsullied, because the Scripture is the most powerful weapon the church has to correct error and to deliver people from bondage into freedom. The teaching of the truth, therefore, must be central in the ministry.

When we were in Australia recently, we found that, in general, the weakness of the churches there (as it is the widespread weakness of American churches) is biblical illiteracy, a failure to know the Word of God and to understand it. Timothy was sent to Ephesus to correct that condition there. He was to oppose the wrong concepts being taught; and second, to expose their faulty sources, to point out the myths and the genealogies that these people were involved with.

(If these were Jewish myths, as I suspect they were, you will find, if you would like to pursue this further, examples of this in the Old Testament Apocrypha. Some of you who have access to Catholic Old Testaments will find fourteen additional books there that are not in our Protestant Bibles. These are called the Apocrypha, books that were never accepted by the Jews as Scripture, but which were widely circulated in the early centuries. Many of these books are made up of fanciful tales of imaginative accounts, usually about wise men who had remarkable teachings about various themes. This is what was being taught along with the Christian truth there in Ephesus.)

These teachers were also making a great deal of fuss about genealogies. They were laying stress on their ancestry, who they were, where they came from, their family ties, their inherited honors, etc.

There is something about all of us that loves that. When Patrick Cunningham and I were in Edinburgh, walking down the Royal Mile between the great Edinburgh Castle on the west and Holyrood Palace on the east, we found it to be lined with shops offering to trace the tourists' Scottish ancestry. For some reason, everybody who goes to Scotland wants to be a Scot -- everyone tries to trace his ancestry to see which clan he belongs to. Patrick found the Cunningham clan and their tartan there, and he purchased one. (I tried to look up the Stedman clan. They did come from Scotland, but they are not part of a clan. I think they were a group of horse thieves who settled in Angus district. They never made it to the tartan class!) At any rate, there is something about all of us that loves this. We want to trace our roots; and we take a particular pride in descending from some famous person. This is what was being introduced into the congregation at Ephesus.

The indication of how wrong this was, was the effect that it had. You will remember that Jesus said, "By their

fruits you shall know them," {Matt 7:20 KJV}. So when you question a teaching, ask yourself, "What does it lead people to do?" Here the apostle tells us very plainly that this teaching promoted speculations, that is, mind trips, fascinating research into themes that tickle the imagination, producing endless debate and specious reasonings (and, I am sure, issuing in the writing of paper after paper to support it). That is what always happens when human philosophy is interjected into the gospel. No matter what its source, it begins to promote speculation and fascinate the mind.

The Bible is a fascinating book. There are many themes in it that trigger the imagination. I find myself intrigued by many of them, and I would long to pursue them at great length.

Now there is nothing wrong with that in itself, except as it so occupies the attention of a congregation that they neglect to understand the great revelation of the Word of God. This takes the place of true biblical study. People begin to pursue speculative matters which take them away from the pure revelation of the Scripture. Timothy was to seek to turn these teachers away from this because it was unhealthy and unprofitable. It resulted in a congregation engrossed in speculative mind adventures.

How was Timothy to do that? Here Paul suggests a third thing. Timothy was to contrast this with the true revelation. He was to charge these teachers not to "occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations, rather than the divine training that is in faith." Now, that is a very poor translation. It ought to be, "the stewardship from God which is by faith." This stewardship is referred to in many places in the writings of Paul. It is the stewardship which God entrusted to Paul and to us, this body of truth which Paul summarizes in Verse 11 as, "the glorious gospel of the blessed God." That is what these teachers ought to have been studying and teaching -- a deposit of truth given by God to men, and appropriated by faith.

Now, faith is not merely belief. Faith is acting on the basis of facts which God has revealed. This is what the apostle is concerned about. That body of truth is unique in the world. In First Corinthians the apostle calls it that "secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification," {1 Cor 2:7 RSV}. It is the secret of how to release men and women from the bondage of evil of various forms in their lives and deliver them into the glorious freedom of the sons of God. That is the nature of the gospel. It is so powerful and so radical that it is always under subtle attack both from without and within. That is why it is so necessary to ensure that the teaching is accurate and true and biblical, because, when it is, it delivers people, it frees people, it changes whole families; it has a powerful effect upon society. Jesus said that would happen: "If you continue in my word you shall be my disciples indeed and you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free," {cf, John 8:31-32 KJV}. The world desperately needs men and women who have learned how to be free in Christ Jesus, to be what God has intended men and women to be. That is what the gospel can do.

There are two essentials in the gospel. All through Scripture the emphasis is on these two things:

- First, the gospel declares there is a total ending of the old life. This is symbolized for us and conveyed to us, historically, by the cross of our Lord Jesus. The dying of Jesus meant that something about our natural humanity was brought to an end. We are delivered from it. It is dead. It is totally ended.
- The second aspect is the impartation of a new life which is totally sufficient for the believer to live on. That is symbolized for us and conveyed to us, historically, by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

There are the two great facts and foci of the gospel: The dying of Jesus, which eliminates the old life, and the resurrection of Jesus, which imparts to us a whole new identity, a whole new basis to live, so we can be new people, no longer hung up by the old bondages and inhibitions that once kept us from being what we wanted to be. That is the gospel. That is the good news.

The essence of Christianity is life. That is the key, the fact from which all else flows. The gospel is the way whereby God has found a means of freeing us from our old life and giving us a new way to live. Remember how John puts it, "He who has the Son has life, and he that has not the Son of God does not have life," {cf, 1Jn 5:12}. It is a mistake to identify the essence of Christianity as a judicial statement by God.

I think that is where the Reformers went astray. Martin Luther and the others merely saw justification by faith as being the decision of God (the Judge) that we were forgiven for our sins. Now, justification does include that -- the Reformers were quite right about that -- but it is more than that. We are forgiven for our sins because we share the life of Jesus. What he is, we are -- that is the central truth of the Christian faith.

Paul says it in Colossians, "Christ, who is our life, shall appear, ..." {Col 3:4 KJV}. He says it in Corinthians, "If any man be in Christ he is a new creation, old things have passed away, behold all things become new," {cf, 2 Cor 5:17 RSV}. That is why, throughout his letters, Paul constantly is exhorting us to "put off the old man which we died to in Christ and put on the new," {Eph 4:22-24, Col 3:9-10}; to "consider yourself dead unto sin and alive unto God," {Rom 6:11}. That is the good news. That is the gospel.

Now these teachers at Ephesus were attacking this. They did not know they were, they did not think they were, but they were, because they were denying that the old life really had ended. By these references to myths and genealogies they were subtly suggesting that there was something of value that carried over from the old life. Your family connections, your ties with the past, the honor, position and prestige which your ancestors had were not rendered valueless, they held. This was an attempt to cling to what was past. By means of these myths they were exalting the mind of man, the wisdom of man, the ability of man to understand and rationalize. They were subtly suggesting (and this still happens today) that everything in the Scripture ought to be subjected to human reason, and what you cannot understand you should reject. This means, ultimately, that the human mind becomes the judge of all truth and reality, whereas Scripture presents it as revelation, confronting us frequently with mysteries we cannot grasp, but which we are to obey. That is what Paul is talking about. Thus, Timothy is sent to correct this. He is encouraged to identify it for what it is by the fact that it "promotes speculations."

Now just as error can be detected by what it produces, so too can truth be detected by what it produces. Paul tells us what it is: "the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith." Here is how you can tell, almost at a glance, what is going on in a church. If a church is giving itself to some subtle form of human philosophy, it will result in endless speculation. (Paul will enlarge on that in just a moment.) But if the truth is being taught and preached and believed, it will always result in a loving congregation. Love is our aim. Love involves activity; speculation involves the mind. Love involves persons, service, compassion, involvement, care, time. That is the way you can tell the difference. The great thrust of the gospel is to produce loving people.

You can tell the gospel is having its effect when that is the effect it has upon you -- when you are becoming a more compassionate, loving, patient, tenderhearted person, and you are reflecting that to those around. That is what Jesus said would happen, and that is why his great commandment to us is that we should love one another.

The apostle now traces the course of love back to its source, its origin, here in Verse 5. I think we will begin to understand more clearly what he is saying if we begin at the end and work back. Paul says, "love that issues from a pure heart," and behind that, "a good conscience," and behind that, "sincere faith." Now, to begin at the end, faith is believing what God has said about the total end of your old life and the impartation of a new life identified with the righteousness of Christ -- that is what you believe. You are a new person; you are not the same. Everything of corrective nature in Christianity is to come back to that source.

(We will see more of that when we get into the passage that deals with Law. The Law cannot change you. You have already been changed. That is the gospel. When you begin to understand and grasp the basis of that change already made you will change. That is what the Scripture is all about.)

Therefore, love begins with sincere faith that the great facts of the gospel are personally true of you. You are the one who died in Christ, and rose again with him, and are seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

When you believe that, your actions will begin to change. You will begin to see that some of the things you have been doing, and the way you have been living, are not consistent with a changed life. They no longer are the normal outworking of a heart that has been made anew in Jesus Christ. Therefore, these things begin to fade. People do not have to be forced to stop things; they begin to see that these things are inconsistent with a

changed life. That is what Paul means when he speaks of a "good conscience." Conscience is the judge of your behavior. It deals with the way you act, either accusing you or excusing you. And, as you begin to be consistent in your actions with what you really are, and see yourself to be, you have a good conscience; it no longer troubles you. You see yourself forgiven, restored, accepted, the past washed away -- not only the past before you became a Christian, but the past as you live existentially through your Christian life. Yesterday, with its sins and mistakes, is cleansed. Every day you begin anew on this basis, living according to a good conscience.

That, in turn, results in a pure heart. The inner attitudes and the thought life begin to change because you are no longer the same person you once were, and you do not think of yourself that way. Your thoughts also begin to change. You find yourself giving up freely and gladly those times when you used to wallow in lustful thoughts. Read *Playbody Magazine* and you find it no longer acceptable to you. It is no longer *you*. You do not want that anymore; you begin to hate yourself for reading it. Your heart is being purified, so that your inner attitudes and thoughts have changed.

Then, as that occurs, you begin to be a vessel for the flowing out of the love of God. As Paul said in Romans 5, "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us," {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV}. Love begins to touch you and those all around you. That is the gospel. That is the good news. Paul is so concerned that *that* be clear and uncomplicated in Ephesus that he sent Timothy there to ensure that.

There is a fourth thing Paul tells Timothy about these teachers. Timothy is to recognize their true state -- where they are coming from, as we would put it today. Verse 6:

Certain persons by swerving from these have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions. {1 Tim 1:6-7 RSV}

In other words, these teachers become "doctrinal wanderers," wandering about from one aspect of human speculation and philosophy to another. If you watch them over the course of time, one thing is characteristic of them: they never stay with one subject but are always pursuing theological and philosophical fads. This results in what Paul calls, "vain discussion." (The New English Bible put it marvelously: "a wilderness of words," it says.) Endless papers and tortured studies are issued constantly to defend this or that aspect of philosophy. This is one way you can recognize these teachers.

Paul says their motive is a desire for position and reputation, not to see that the truth is taught or that lives are changed. They desire to be "teachers of the law," motivated by ambitious pride. Yet, Paul says, the remarkable thing is that they do not understand what they are saying or the sources from which they take their knowledge. Though they appear to be impressive teachers, they are without any real understanding of reality. That is why these subtle intrusions of doctrinal aberrations must be caught at their source. We must be careful to return to the biblical and apostolic witness of the truth as it is in Jesus. Anything that takes away from our understanding of the totality of the end of the old life -- or from the fullness of supply of a totally new life available to us now -- is a weakening of the apostolic witness and promotes speculations and vain discussions which go nowhere in a church. Timothy's first task, therefore, was to help the elders of the church at Ephesus to understand that they must stop certain teaching that was differing at these points.

In our next study, in Verses 8-11, we want to look carefully at what the apostle has to say about what place the Law of Moses has in the Christian life. This again will be in line with the "glorious gospel of the blessed God," which ought to be the emphasis of every church.

Prayer

We thank you, our Father, for the truth of the gospel. What good news it is that we do not have to endlessly struggle with all the inhibitions and inherited tendencies toward evil that we had in our life, but that these have been ended, and our struggle is to believe that! Grant to us, Lord, that we may learn more fully to believe it and how to appropriate it, that we might enter into life as it is in Jesus; that new life which is available to us, by which we may become

loving persons, as he was. We pray in his name, Amen.

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