

When I left the Presbyterian Theological College and went into my first parish in 1988, a man who had been a mentor to me gave me a copy of the IVP “New Dictionary of Theology” edited by Sinclair Ferguson and J.I. Packer inscribed with the words - “with prayers for a very fruitful ministry”.

This man knew the importance of good theology - Reformed theology. He wanted me to remain true to the biblical and evangelical doctrines defended during the Protestant Reformation, like the authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone. In other words, he wanted me to remain a true son in the faith.

Paul, the apostle, had the same desire for Timothy. He considered himself to be the young minister’s spiritual father, so he addressed his first Pastoral Epistle, or letter, to “Timothy, my true son in the faith” (verse 2a). At the time he wrote this (around 63-65 AD), Paul was coming to the close of his world-changing ministry, as God’s apostle and evangelist to the Gentiles. The letter brings grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ to Timothy, Paul’s spiritual son (v. 2b).

Timothy was a true son in the faith in several respects. Paul first met the young man when he passed through Lystra (in modern Turkey) on his second missionary journey. Perhaps he led Timothy to Christ at that time. At the time of his second visit to Lystra, Paul invited Timothy to join him on his missionary travels (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy began his ministry under the great apostle. He seemed like a son because he was relatively young. This is why Timothy is such an excellent model for young ministers. He was probably in his thirties by the time this letter was written, yet later in the letter, Paul tells him not to let anyone look down on him because he is young (1 Timothy 4:12). Paul also considered Timothy a son because of their close personal relationship. They travelled together to Thessalonica, to Corinth and Ephesus and even to Jerusalem. Timothy stayed at Paul’s side during the apostle’s first imprisonment in Rome. Paul’s closeness to and admiration of Timothy are seen in Paul’s naming him as the co-sender of six of his letters and in his speaking highly of him to the Philippians (Philippians 2:19-22). Timothy also served as Paul’s pastoral representative, the church leader delegated to lead the church Paul had planted in Ephesus. At the end of Paul’s life he requested Timothy to join him at Rome (2 Timothy 4:9, 21). After all they had been through, it is not surprising Paul considered Timothy his spiritual son!

Paul’s purpose in 1 Timothy is to help his spiritual son remain true. In the first 11 verses of the letter he encourages him to hold on to the true faith, to defend the true doctrine, to uphold the true use of the law and to cherish a true love. Let us consider each of these in turn.

1. Hold on to the True Faith (verse 2)

Timothy had true faith. The important thing about him was not that he was Paul’s child, but that he was God’s child. He was a true child in the faith. Timothy was a true son of Paul because he was a true son of God. Their family ties were bound by their common faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps Paul called God “the Father” at the beginning of his letter in v.2 to remind Timothy that he was God’s dear child. This is every believer’s great privilege. As the apostle John rejoices, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1) Everyone who is born again by God’s Spirit is a son or daughter of God, with a right to all of God’s fatherly care and affection. Have you repented of your sin - turned from it - and trusted in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and a new life lived for God’s glory and not your own? Such conversion, such a great change in our lives is the work of God’s Spirit - it occurs only by his grace.

(1 Timothy 1:1-11; Revelation 2:1-7)

Timothy learned this true faith at his mother's knee. In his 2nd letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (1 Timothy 1:5). Timothy was a true son in the faith not only to Paul, but also to his own believing mother.

Many Christian sons and daughters have learnt the faith from their mothers. Augustine wrote in his book "Confessions" how his mother Monica wrestled in prayer for his salvation, weeping and pleading with God for his salvation. Susanna Wesley prayed continually for her children, including John and Charles, and taught them the truths and duties of the Christian faith from an early age. Or consider J. Gresham Machen, the defender of the Orthodox Christian faith at Princeton and Westminster seminaries during the early decades of the 20th century. It was his mother, Mary, who taught him from the Bible, the Westminster Shorter Catechism and "Pilgrim's Progress". Perhaps your mother played a crucial role in laying the foundation of your Christian faith? Mothers, grandmothers, what better use of time and energy than to invest (both through prayer and teaching) in the spiritual development of your children/grandchildren - right from an early age, that they might grow to be, like Timothy, true children in the faith.

2. Defend/Hold to the True Doctrine (verses 3-4)

If a true son becomes an elder, either a teaching elder or a ruling elder, he must teach and defend true doctrine. And every Christian should seek to hold to, to know and embrace, true doctrine. The first thing that Paul says to Timothy in the body of the letter is: "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay here in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work - which is by faith" (verses 3-4). This command helps put the entire epistle in context. Timothy was in Ephesus, the centre of Paul's church-planting strategy for Asia Minor. The letter was written sometime after the events of Acts 28, at least 8 years after Paul's stay of 3 years in Ephesus ministering the gospel (Acts 19:10, 20:31).

Paul's first letter to Timothy was actually his second letter to the Ephesians. It was not private correspondence. The benediction at the end of the letter is given in the plural - indicating that Paul expected his letter to be read to the whole church. This means that 1 Timothy can and should be read on several different levels: (a) as a personal letter from an apostle to a minister delegated to lead a local church; (b) as a pastoral letter from a church planter to the congregation he loves, with instructions for their ongoing work; and (c) as a general statement of principles for life, ministry and worship in the family of faith. I believe that Paul gives us his purpose statement for the letter in 3:14-15: "I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God".

Timothy was to remain in Ephesus in order to "command certain men not to teach false doctrines" (v. 3). Any doctrine which is different from the true doctrine is a false doctrine. Any gospel which is different to the gospel of the grace of God in Christ revealed in the Bible is a false gospel. Notice that in verse 10 Paul speaks of "the sound doctrine". The Bible insists that there is one standard for Christian theology - and that is the teaching of Christ and his apostles found in the pages of the New Testament, in full agreement with the prophetic witness of the Old Testament.

Who were these false teachers of the Ephesian church? Paul refers to "certain men" - and no doubt Timothy knew exactly whom he was talking about! What were these men teaching? They were obsessed with "myths and endless genealogies" (v. 4). Even though there was some Greek influence on the church, "myths and endless genealogies" probably refers to the teaching of certain Jewish men. Two ancient Jewish texts - "The Book of Jubilees" (about 125BC) and "The Biblical Antiquities of Philo" (just after 70AD) - shed further light on Paul's meaning. These books retell the Old Testament story from a

(1 Timothy 1:1-11; Revelation 2:1-7)

Pharisaic point of view and include extended genealogies. The false teachers at Ephesus seem to have been thinking along similar lines. They started with the Word of God and then made up the rest as they went along. In those days, just as now, such speculative theories were likely to excite the interest of weak and unsound hearers.

The church in our day faces the same danger. There are cult writings like the Book of Mormon, full of myths and which deny key teachings of the Bible, such as the fact that Jesus Christ is God. A good deal of Roman Catholic dogma is also mythical. Central Catholic doctrines such as purgatory, the veneration of saints and the adoration of Mary come from tradition. They are speculations that go beyond the teaching of the Bible. Another myth is any attempt to find hidden knowledge in the Bible or to provide secret knowledge about Jesus (Dan Brown's novel, "The Da Vinci Code" falls into this category). If you hear or are confronted with any new or strange teaching that doesn't fit with your knowledge and understanding of the Bible, be on guard, and speak to a minister or elder about it. Although they are not myths or genealogies, many evangelical discussions about the end times fall into this category because they become endless and cause people to become obsessed and distracted, losing sight of their salvation in Christ and its outworking in their lives here and now.

The problem with such teachings is that they "promote controversies rather than God's work" (v. 4). They don't advance Gospel ministry. They should not be taught or entertained in any way because to do so is a complete waste of time. People entertaining such "meaningless talk" begin to drift away from the faith - which is the way most people abandon orthodox Christianity: one step at a time. Today one place to find such meaningless talk is on the internet, where people often engage in tiresome and unproductive theological dialogues. Sadly, the same is also true at times of seminaries and Bible colleges where scholars are on a perpetual quest for novelty. But some religious matters are not even worth a good argument. Salvation in Christ is the most important thing God has ever planned or accomplished for his people. Therefore, surely, it is the most important message for us to study, to teach and to live out. Nothing should distract us from that message, least of all some idle speculation which goes beyond God's Word, the Bible. Why waste time when there is God's work to be done?

3. Uphold the True Use of the Law (vv. 6-11)

The reason the false teachers in Ephesus were unbalanced had something to do with God's law. Their desire to be "teachers of the law" (v. 7) suggests that they claimed the right to interpret the law of Moses. The false teachers wanted to be law-teachers, which brought to Paul's mind a third thing every true child in the faith must have: a true understanding of the law. Paul affirms in v.8 that the law is good: "We know that the law is good if one uses it properly".

What is the proper way to use the law? Reformation Christians have taught that there are 3 proper uses of biblical law. One is the spiritual use of the law to reveal sin. In his "Lectures on Galatians", Martin Luther wrote that the law shows sinners their sin "so that by the recognition of sin they may be humbled, frightened and worn down, and so long for grace", that is be drawn to Christ. A second use of the law is its civil use to restrain wrongdoers. This is how the law is useful for society - it keeps criminals in their place. The third use is to teach believers how to live for Christ, to teach us God's will for our lives.

Which use of the law does Paul have in mind when he writes, "the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious" (v. 9)? Obviously he is not describing the third use of the law in which the Christian obeys the law of Christ. Rather, he mainly has in view the second use of the law - its power in society to restrain those who are a law unto themselves. The second use of the law is implied by Paul's list of vices in vv. 9-10. Here Paul chooses the kinds of gross

sin that civil laws often prohibit, although less so now in our own society as the Judeo-Christian foundations of our society are dismantled. You will note that the list in these verses seems to echo many of the Ten Commandments. According to Roman law, many of these vices were punishable by death. The law has a serious purpose of restraining wicked behaviour. This, Paul says, is why God gave his law, not for idle speculation and meaningless talk.

Paul's concluding comment about the law at the end of our passage comes as something of a surprise: the law is "for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me" (vv. 10-11). The detestable sins just mentioned by Paul are not only against the law, but they also fail to conform to the gospel which tells the glory of God. The gospel thus requires the same conduct that the law requires - but not as a way to earn God's grace, to earn our salvation, but as the appropriate response of gratitude to God for what he has done for us in Christ.

Not only does lawlessness fail to conform to the gospel, but it is also contrary to "sound doctrine". That word translated "sound" is a medical term meaning "healthy" or "wholesome". Life cannot be separated from doctrine. Unhealthy theology produces unhealthy conduct, and an unsound life points to unsound doctrine. Every sin comes ultimately from a failure to believe rightly about God. Paul's emphasis on the sound doctrine is a valuable corrective for our pluralistic, postmodern society in which people say, "Your theology is just your opinion. Christianity may be true for you, but not for me". God wants his true sons and daughters in the faith, those of us who belong to him by faith in Jesus, to know and defend the true doctrine - our supreme standard, the Bible, which is our only rule of faith and practice, that is our living out of our faith in Christ in this world day by day.

4. Cherish a True Love (v. 5)

To many people the term "doctrine" sounds rigid, inflexible, impractical, even boring. The last person most people want to meet is someone who will straighten out their theology. However, that is exactly what Paul tells Timothy to do: "command certain men not to teach false doctrines". The Bible thus gives ministers and elders the authority to oppose false doctrine. But what is the purpose or goal of defending true doctrine? It is to create true love: "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (v. 5). A true son or daughter in the faith must have true love, which, according to the Bible, flows naturally from a love for doctrine.

Only true doctrine teaches people how to love God and others. True doctrine fosters the love that comes from a "pure heart". A pure or cleansed heart is a loving heart because it has no self-interest. Its only desire is to put others first. True love also comes from a "good conscience". A guilty conscience creates distance or even animosity in a relationship. But a conscience made good by God's grace has nothing to hide. It brings people close to one another in intimate relationship. Then true love comes from "a sincere faith" - literally an "unhypocritical faith". A hypocrite cannot love anyone as much as he loves himself. He is mainly concerned what others think of him, whereas true love is selfless. Jesus is our great and perfect example of such love, isn't he? And he said to his disciples, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12-13). Are you prepared to lay down your life for a brother or sister in Christ, to lay down your time, your energy, your comfort, to help him or her fight the good fight of faith, to run the race of faith?

Do you practise the doctrine of love as much as you love your doctrine? The better you understand God's grace in Christ, the more your life will overflow with love for the

(1 Timothy 1:1-11; Revelation 2:1-7)

church, your brothers and sisters in Christ, with zeal for the lost and with compassion for the needy.

The Bible does not indicate if Timothy remained a true son in the faith. Presumably he did. But sadly the Bible does indicate that eventually his congregation wandered from the Lord. The New Testament contains yet another letter to the Ephesians. The short letter to the Ephesian Church in Revelation 2 warmly commends the congregation for defending true doctrine: "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false" (verse 2). Yet somewhere along the way the Ephesians lost their true love: "Yet I hold this against you: "You have forsaken your first love" (v. 4). These people loved their doctrine, but they were forgetting the doctrine of love - failing to live in love.

This is a reminder that the true children of God must have true love as well as true faith and true doctrine. Who is sufficient for these things? Who is able to uphold and defend the truth of God's Word while at the same time living out the love of the gospel? We can - but only through the saving work of Jesus Christ, the one who came from the Father, full of grace and truth, and through the transforming work of the Spirit of God - in our hearts and lives.

Amen

Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.