

Notes on 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon Commentary and Application

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ISBN: 9798880268887

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DEDICATION

To Christ's flock — I pray that you may know for certain
that all of Scripture is God-breathed. (2 Tim 3:16)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am especially grateful to those who have helped me
check and double check this work. Dear saints in our church
have labored to bring this to fruition. In this way we strive to
make Jesus known together. Thank you.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is meant to be read with your Bible! Each chapter deals with a portion of Scripture from 2 Timothy, Titus, or Philemon, and the best way to navigate these pages is using the Bible as your guide. It is my prayer that in doing so you would encounter the Lord Jesus Christ, your affection for God's Word will grow, and you will find yourself in good company with the Berean saints who, "received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11)

PART I

2 TIMOTHY

CHAPTER 1 | 2 TIMOTHY 1:1-7

The book of 2 Timothy is the final book, chronologically speaking, in the Pauline corpus. It was written around 67-68 AD during Paul's second Roman imprisonment before he was executed under Caesar Nero in Rome.

While writing this letter, Paul sensed that his time on this earth was drawing to a close and that he would soon depart to enter into Christ's rest (2 Tim 4:6-8). This makes what Paul says in this letter much more pressing. Here in 2 Timothy, we are faced with the Spirit-inspired words of a man who is faced with the difficult task of writing what could very well have been his last words to the church. This leads us to a critical question. If you knew that your time on this earth was drawing to a close, what would you say to those you love? How would you instruct them? How would you encourage them?¹

¹ For a parallel example drawn from the life of Christ, examine Matt 26:17-46, Mark 14:12-42, Luke 22:7-46, and John 13-17.

During his imprisonment, Paul thought much of his apprentice and ministry partner, Timothy. Paul loved Timothy like his own son (1 Tim 1:2). He knew of the challenges that Timothy faced and he also knew that before long, he would not be around to guide this younger Jesus follower anymore; he must commit Timothy to Christ's care.

Based upon this context, it is natural to approach 2 Timothy with some somberness. Remarkably though, in his final days before going to the executioner's sword, Paul never gave up on the gospel. He kept his eyes fixed on Christ and the glorious gospel. He set his hand to uplift a dearly loved saint and the congregation Timothy cared for (likely the Ephesian church).

V. 1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus.

The opening verse of 2 Timothy presents no surprises to the NT student. This is a version of Paul's typical epistolary greeting. He identifies himself, his sanctified work as an apostle, and the authority by which he has come to that work.

Paul reminds the reader time and again in his introductions that it is God who makes ministers of His word, and He has done so in accord with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which brings life to the one who, by faith, receives it.

At this point it may be edifying to consider the term *apostle*, which Paul applies to himself (and others), since there has been somewhat of a debate in Christian circles regarding

this terminology.

The answer to the question “Do apostles still exist today?” has been a lingering cause of Christian division in our modern era. Some Christians believe that there are no longer apostles in our time and that there have not been any since the close of what is called “The Apostolic Age,” which is supposed to have terminated around the close of the first century. It is assumed that, by that time, the church no longer required apostolic leadership since God had provided the church with the authoritative writing of the Apostles in this glorious book – the Bible.

On the other hand, others argue that there is no place in the NT that definitively declares that the work of apostles will cease, so the work of apostles continues into our day.

The majority of Christians fall into one of these two camps, which are typically viewed as mutually exclusive.

It was precisely this question – Do apostles still exist? – that I posed to a group of students while teaching at Calvary Bible Institute in Trujillo, Peru. The response was mixed, as you might expect.

Recently a well-known, and highly regarded, Christian personality produced a video that was widely distributed on social media that made the authoritative declaration that apostles no longer exist in our age; if you think they do, you have misread your Bible. He further implied that if you believe apostles exist, you are on the slippery slope of heresy and flawed Biblical interpretation.

The answer to this contentious question is not that simple — even though we may desire it to be so — and any

assertion to the contrary is likely the product of an inherited denominational framework (or carefully curated systematic theology) influencing one's theological thought.²

The answer, biblically speaking, to our question, “Do apostles still exist in God’s church today?” is yes ... and no. What a quandary! Now we have something to wrestle with! And Christians have certainly embraced the fight — sometimes with too much zeal.

Blomberg and Markley write on this matter (and similarly contentious matters), “Each side is often correct in what it *observes* and wrong in what it *infers* from its observations.”³ (emphasis added)

The fact is that different NT writers use the term apostle differently. Luke, the author of the gospel bearing his name and the book of Acts, typically uses the term as a proper noun referring to what we would call *The Apostles par excellence*, which only includes those men who “followed Jesus from the days of John the Baptist onward and [bore] witness of the

² While Systematic and Biblical theologies are both essential, we must take care in how significantly we allow any system to influence our interpretation lest we come to an unbiblical conclusion. Blomberg and Markley caution, “Systematic theology can prejudice our reading of individual texts...when we fail to observe differences between one Biblical writer’s or corpus’ use of key words or concepts and another’s. In this situation, systematic theology trumps Biblical theology, not just exegesis. Biblical theology may be defined as ‘that branch of theology whose concern it is to study each corpus of the Scripture in its own right, especially with respect to its place in the history of God’s unfolding revelation.” Craig L. Blomberg and Jennifer Foutz Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 222.

³ Blomberg and Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*, 223.

resurrection.”⁴

In contrast to that generally limited usage found in Luke’s writings (and the other gospels), Paul uses the term much more freely (at least 33 times) – “including himself, Junia, Andronicus, James (the Lord’s half-brother), and Epaphroditus.”⁵ Blomberg and Markley conclude the argument quite convincingly, and I am inclined to agree with their conclusion:

Consistent with the broader use of the term in the Greek language of the day, ‘apostle’ for Paul meant ‘someone sent on a mission’ or, as we might call such a person today, a missionary. Are there apostles today? Yes, in the Pauline sense. No, in the Lukan sense. Each definition must be kept separate and the one must not be used to blur the individual characteristics of the other.⁶

Where modern Christians get into trouble with this question is when they try to grasp the title Apostle as defined by Luke and the gospel writers, for themselves, in order to assert some form of authority that is not theirs to possess. The ugly side of that belief is that when self-styled apostles of our age do so, their actions communicate an errant understanding of God’s ecclesiastic authority structures and the nature and purpose of the gifts and offices He has given to His church to equip the saints for ministry.

⁴ Blomberg and Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*, 223. The term “apostle” is used collectively nine times in the Synoptics and never in the gospel of John. It is used at least 33 times in the Pauline literature.

⁵ Blomberg and Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*, 223.

⁶ Blomberg and Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*, 223.

As Paul writes in Ephesians, “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” (Eph 4:11-12). Unfortunately, in instances of fraudulent self-ordination to the Apostolic office, such people typically view the gifts that Jesus gave to His church as individual positions of personal power. They also see these various giftings as a vertical hierarchy rather than as complementary horizontal gifts existing on the same plane of authority with the primary goal of equipping the saints for ministry (which is uniquely others-centered), rather than wielding excessive power over the church.

Anybody with an unhealthy fixation on titles, position, hierarchy, and unbiblical authority should be rejected. As Jesus taught:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

Certainly, Jesus’ teaching on spiritual authority, married with servanthood, was part and parcel of Paul’s ministry (he often referred to himself as a bondservant or a slave). So then those who are called to serve God’s people ought to earnestly endeavor to embrace the teaching of Christ at the heart of their ministry as well.

V. 2 To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and

peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Another common trait of Paul's writings is that he always begins with grace. Here Paul commends just a few of the myriad precious attributes of God — grace, mercy, and peace — to his dear pupil.

While we may be tempted to quickly skip over these lines because they are so familiar to us, we must take time to reflect upon the weight of these words. They are equally inspired – just like the grand theological truths we love to chew on and debate over. Grace, mercy, and peace are continual, progressive experiences of God's character in the healthy Christian life.

Grace is that undeserved, un-earnable favor of God extended to those who have instead garnered God's just condemnation for violating His law. God's grace was extended to us while we were yet his enemies (Rom 5:6-10, Tit 2:11). Grace is both our starting point as believers and the finish line. We are saved by grace alone (Eph 2:4-10)! And by God's grace, we who believe are kept and sanctified as we follow Jesus.

Mercy is God applying the condemnation that we deserve to Jesus Christ in our stead so that we who have been saved by grace shall be delivered from God's wrath (1 Thess 1:10).

As we experience the fullness of God's grace and mercy continually extended toward us, we find *peace* – that settling of our spirit that occurs as the result of God's grace and mercy.

Since we have experienced, and continue to experience,

God's attributes of grace, mercy, and peace, we are to embody these characteristics and extend them to others.

As we will see, this was a timely reminder for Timothy, who was himself despairing. Reminding believers of God's grace, mercy, and peace is always good, especially in the challenging moments of life and ministry.

Vv. 3-5 I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well.

All was not well with Timothy. At some point, Paul had traveled to meet with Timothy, likely between his first letter and this one, and Timothy was out of sorts. As Paul penned this letter he was mindful of Timothy's tears, an indicator of his emotional state.

Remember that Timothy was faced with an enormous pastoral task at Ephesus – to refute heresy, to establish (or perhaps re-establish) sound doctrine, to remind the church of God's design for church governance, and much more.

We get the sense that Timothy was discouraged, disheartened, and in need of godly encouragement. Perhaps after laboring for a while and carrying out his pastoral duties, Timothy began to despair as he shepherded God's people. After all, people are messy, and the pastoral task is not for the

faint of heart.

Nevertheless, Paul did not relieve Timothy of this divine task but rather reminded him of his spiritual heritage, his sincere faith, and the fact that Timothy was covered in prayer.

Sometimes the work of a pastor can be challenging and even discouraging for many reasons. Perhaps the pastor does not see the results he expected. Maybe he finds himself being dragged headlong into theologically contentious territory. Speaking from the perspective of a pastor myself, I can say that we deeply long for God's people to be unified by the Holy Spirit and to hold to sound doctrine. We desire to see God's people grow in the "grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). And when things do not go as expected, it hurts, it can be frustrating, and sometimes we can begin to doubt our effectiveness, qualifications, and even our calling.

Nevertheless, the call to faithfulness remains intact, and the best medicine that others can offer to the despairing pastor is encouragement – a simple word, "I'm praying for you," or "Remember those who have gone before you," or "I'm coming to visit you." All of these can be tremendous encouragements, and Paul employed these in order to try and lift Timothy's spirits.

Moving forward, Paul has more to say on the subject of encouragement needed by those carrying out the work of a pastor.

Vv. 6-7 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my

hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

Simply said, Paul reminds Timothy not to give up, but to press into God's calling. Even though Timothy did despair, Paul did not see him as disqualified.

Paul knew better than most that laboring in God's Kingdom brings its own unique perils (2 Cor 11:23-33), and the salve that brings comfort to those tempted to despair while carrying out God's work is to press into God Himself (James 4:8)!

To this end, Paul reminds Timothy of the certainty of his calling ratified by Paul himself by the laying on of his hands. This is the second time Paul reminded Timothy of this. In 1 Tim 4:14-15, Paul wrote to him,

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.

Please understand, there is no magical experience in the laying on of hands by the eldership of a church; instead, this act serves as a symbolic, and spiritually significant, recognition of one's calling and gifting given by God. It is through the appointing of ministers of the gospel, and their being recognized by the church community, that God visibly sets apart specific individuals for His work (Acts 13:2-3).

These experiences, in accord with God's design for church governance, served as divine milestones in Timothy's life, just like the faith of his mother and grandmother. He could look back, reflect upon, and remember the certainty of his calling

that had been ratified by the elders of the church.

As alluded to earlier, it is easy for those in pastoral ministry (or any ministry) to believe they are unworthy of their calling when they encounter resistance. Not so, says Paul! Rather, dig deep and fan the flames of devotion in your life. Let God breathe on those smoldering embers that have faded in the face of discouragement, and seek to reignite the fire that was once burned so fervently in your heart. This is a timely reminder for all Christians! Do not despair!

Paul was sensitive to our human tendency to lose heart in the face of suffering – even, or maybe especially, suffering for the sake of the gospel.

He experienced this personally and even wrote about it:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again (2 Cor 1:8-10).

In fact, during his own ministry, and after nearly being killed, Paul did not resign but set out to “strengthen the souls of the disciples,” reminding them of the hope we have in Christ in the face of suffering. Luke records in Acts:

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned

to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, *strengthening the souls of the disciples*, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that *through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God* (Acts 14:19-22, emphasis added).

Don't give up. Through many tribulations, we must enter the Kingdom of God, and He will never leave or forsake us. By God's grace, mercy, and peace, let us set our hearts to fan into flame the gift that God has given us, and let us not lose heart. We are not alone (Gal 6:9, Heb 13:5).

CHAPTER 2 | 2 TIMOTHY 1:8-12

Noting Timothy's likely despair observed in the previous verses, and Paul's deep care for him, we see in this material that Paul continues to encourage his heart.

V. 8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God

Prominent NT Greek scholar, William Mounce, comments,

V 8 is the thesis statement of 2 Tim 1:3–2:13 as it calls for loyalty to Christ and the gospel as well as for loyalty to Paul himself...V 8 does not mean that Timothy is ashamed; the verse is a continual call to arms in the face of opposition. The possibility of failure and sin is always present and always merits close attention. Peter and Barnabas failed (Gal 2:11–13); Timothy could also fall.⁷

By affirming the sincerity of Timothy's faith and the providential gift that Timothy possessed, Paul called for Timothy to steel himself in the pastoral work and to reject any sense of shame that he may be tempted to harbor. This exhortation applies to our lives as well.

It only takes a few moments of self-reflection for Christians to conclude that we have not always been as

⁷ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 479.

forthcoming in our personal lives regarding the gospel, which is the testimony about our Lord Jesus.

In an opportune moment of sharing the gospel, or in a conversation where the truths of the Bible are being challenged, many of us have shrunk from the moment. Sometimes that is because, at some level, our flesh rebelling against the spirit, is ashamed to be associated with that glorious truth. Adding to our sense of shame, we reason privately that we would rather be counted as “one of the guys” (or girls) than be labeled a wet blanket, contrarian, religious zealot, radical fundamentalist, etc. We momentarily forget that if we applied the gospel rightly, in gentleness and respect, then it is *good news* — not a buzz kill. It is the promise of life and renewal and peace, and those who would seek to mischaracterize these life-giving truths bring shame upon their own selves.

As Peter writes:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil” (1 Peter 3:13-17).

In our moments of timidity, we learn much about our inconsistency, our desire to please those outside the faith, the fear of other people, the fear of being misunderstood, the

fear of being accused of hate when grounded in love, and the fear of exclusion. These fears assail us and convince us that it would be better not to identify in the suffering of our spiritual forebears and the Lord Jesus Himself.

If left unchecked, this can lead to a vicious cycle of guilt, shame, and fear in the Christian life because, having capitulated to the sensibilities of the age, we feel as if we have fallen short of our high calling to exemplify the gospel in our lives for fear of rejection. This leads to those vicious lies springing up in our minds that say, “See...you are the worst Christian ever! You are ashamed of the gospel! Do you really even believe this at all?!” Sadly, because of this cycle of shame we can sideline ourselves, which is not Christ’s desire for us.

As we reflect upon how boldly Peter wrote about identifying in Christ’s sufferings and giving a defense at all times for our blessed hope we must remember that Peter learned this lesson the hard way – through personal failure. It was Peter who said to Jesus, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.” Jesus replied, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.” (Luke 22:33-34)

You know the story. Peter *failed* in dramatic fashion (Luke 22:54-62), and Jesus *knew* it would happen. He even tried to warn Peter in advance that it would happen. And yet, after Peter’s failure, it was Christ who called to him, restored him, and enabled him to fulfill his ministry (John 21). Do you see how the Bible holds a mirror up for us that reflects the human condition we can all identify with?

Fear not – you are not alone. The marvelous thing about the Bible is that, inspired by God, it captures the human condition as it is, in all its complexity and mess. However, inasmuch as it shows us our mess it also presents to us the ideal, that which is being wrought in the lives of believers by the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, that divine process we call sanctification.

While we all struggle with seasons of inconsistency and timidity regarding our faith, we are encouraged to grow in our faith, to be bold yet gracious, compassionate, and peaceful.

So here Paul encourages Timothy, who was likely disheartened, not to be ashamed of the gospel nor of Paul, who had been imprisoned for his faith. In the following verses, he describes why there is no shame in the gospel.

Even when the world endeavors to paint the gospel in a negative light, it remains unassailable. The testimony of our Lord is *good news*, and despite the unsavory actions of Christians throughout history and the wiles of the devil hurled at the church, the gospel remains pure, true, and unstained by shame or guilt. As a matter of fact, the gospel is the only lasting remedy to shame and guilt.

The words of Christ still ring true: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, NKJV).

Vv. 9-10 who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested

through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,

In verse 8, Paul encouraged Timothy not to be ashamed of two things: the testimony about our Lord, and Paul's own self and imprisonment. Remember that Paul intentionally described himself as the Lord's prisoner, presenting his less-than-ideal circumstances as part and parcel of the Lord's sovereignty over his life.

Here in verses 9 and 10, Paul presents the content of his testimony and the gospel itself in quite succinct but very rich terms. Though Paul was often surrounded by a lot of "noise," he had become quite skillful at keeping the main thing the main thing and directing the attention of his students to the great truths of the gospel.

Today deconstructionists, who have little affection for the Scriptures and little trust in the authority of Scripture, have asked, "What is 'the gospel?'" and "How can we even begin to define what that means?" They argue that the term itself took on a life of its own after Jesus' ministry. Sadly, many deconstructionists are unwilling to believe the words of the Apostles on the matter, and are content with ignoring what Jesus Himself taught about the gospel.

The Bible supplies an answer to this question. And where this question is asked in sincerity we must be prepared to take it seriously. At the very beginning of Mark's gospel (1:1), we find the introduction: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." By this, we infer that the entire

contents of Mark's gospel, faithfully presenting the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, is the gospel (and by extension the other gospel writings as well).

We also see some of the content of the gospel preached by Jesus Himself in Mark's gospel:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:14-15).

And in Luke:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim *good news* to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' (Luke 4:16-19, emphasis added)

This is the gospel! The argument that we cannot define the gospel is a farce and probably more a projection of one's desire to evade the simple meaning of the text rather than a legitimate deconstructionist argument.

Likewise, Paul distills the gospel here in 2 Tim 1:9-10. The gospel, the good news, is that the Lord Jesus Christ, by means of His grace over and against our works and according to His own preordained purposes, saves those who by faith receive the gospel.

The veracity of this message is evidenced by the manifestation and appearing of Christ in the flesh. The man Jesus Christ is not a myth; He was made known, made real, revealed to creation, and revealed to human history.⁸ By His work (His life, death, resurrection, and exaltation), He has abolished death and established everlasting life.

This is the gospel – sin and death have been defeated by a very real Christ of whom the Scriptures bear witness.

V. 11 for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher,

It was for this glorious message that Paul was appointed to his various ministerial duties. At this point, it may be helpful to examine the different roles that Paul embraced in his high calling so that we may see how expansive Paul’s ministry actually was, and how much of his life he dedicated to advancing the gospel in the midst of suffering.

Notice that Paul uses three different terms to describe his calling: preacher, apostle, and teacher. While there is some overlap of responsibility and attributes between them, they each hold distinct and essential meanings.

A *preacher* is a public herald. The term is used at least 77 times in the NT in various forms (“preach, preached,

⁸ Behind the English word “manifested” is the Greek word *φανερῶω*, which for this usage contextually means, “to cause to become known, disclose, show, make known ... become public knowledge, be disclosed, become known.” William Arndt et al, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1048.

preaching”) and typically denotes somebody making a public declaration. As far as Jesus and the Apostles are concerned, this is commonly used to describe the public declaration of the gospel.

The term *apostle* (ἀπόστολος, apostolos), in the basic sense, means someone who is sent out and is closely associated with the cognate verb ἀποστέλλω (apostelloh) which means “I send out.”

Much discussion has already been dedicated to the definition of apostle and how that term was understood previously. It is sufficient at this point to say that an apostle, in a general sense, is one who is sent out with a particular message — in this case, *the gospel*. In fact, Paul was sent not only by God (though that is the primary basis of his authority) but also by the church at Antioch in obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit as one committed to the declaration of the gospel message (Act 13:3).⁹

The definition of the term *teacher* may be intuitive, but to refresh our memories, it means “one who provides instruction.”¹⁰ It is necessary to understand this definition of a teacher in conjunction with the preceding term preacher. If preaching is the public declaration of God’s Word, then teaching is getting into the nitty-gritty of the content — expounding upon God’s Word, observing, interpreting, and

⁹ This verse uses a different term for “sending” — ἀπολύω.

¹⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 415.

applying the text, and building upon the truths that have been preached to and received by the hearer.

I would suggest that the primary thrust of Spirit-inspired, Biblical *preaching* is to bring about conversion as the Holy Spirit illuminates the hearts and minds of the hearers unto repentance and faith. And the primary thrust of Spirit-inspired, Biblical *teaching* is to unfold the truths of God's Word in order to strengthen believers in maturity as we walk Jesus' path of sanctification. Both of these work together in God's Kingdom for the advancement of the gospel and the building up of God's people.

V. 12 which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.

While some people who are uninitiated into ministerial work may view this work as a soft life, Paul expressly declares that is not the case. Because of this holy calling, this work as a preacher, apostle, and teacher of the testimony of Jesus Christ, Paul experienced much hardship and suffering. The specific suffering Paul was referring to was his imprisonment and, ultimately, his own death. However, Paul was not whining about it. Just as he encouraged Timothy not to be ashamed in v. 8, Paul here declares his own steadfastness – *he is not ashamed* of the gospel, of his ministry, of his suffering. While some may have viewed Paul's suffering, especially at the hands of the governing authorities, as a mark of God's

displeasure, Paul embraced it as a mark of righteousness and encouraged Timothy to share in the same suffering if need be (Cf. v. 8).

Paul did not despair at this point, but instead sought to encourage a downtrodden believer (Timothy) on the basis of his trust and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who remains faithful at all times.

After all of the crazy suffering Paul had endured, he became convinced of the Lord's faithfulness to him. And that is the message for believers today – do not despair, the Lord is near, and He is ever faithful (1 Cor 1:9, 2 Thess 3:3, 1 Tim 1:14). While there are times we think we are the last keepers of the faith, the final guardians of truth, we see here that Christ is the one who guards *us!* He is our keeper, and nothing can snatch us from His hand. When our strength fails, He is the almighty. When our doctrinal prowess falters, He is our teacher. When our love grows faint, He is love. When we are assailed on all fronts, *He guards us.* As the popular hymn proclaims, “When the night is holding on to me ... God is holding on.”¹¹ Be encouraged, He is faithful.

¹¹ John Mark McMillan and Sarah McMillan, “King of my Heart,” Meaux Jeux Music, Raucous Ruckus Publishing, admin Capital CMG Publishing, 2015.

CHAPTER 3 | 2 TIMOTHY 1:13-18

In this section of Scripture, Paul continues to instruct and encourage Timothy regarding faithfulness. We also learn more about Paul's personal circumstances and the disappointments he experienced in his own ministry. We see how those disappointments and abandonments shaped Paul's understanding of faithfulness. And to some extent, we see how these experiences motivated Paul to encourage Timothy in faithfulness.

V. 13 Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Even though Timothy was well-seasoned in ministry when Paul wrote this letter, he was not exempt from basic pastoral instruction.¹² No person in ministry, no matter how mature or how expansive their duties, is ever instructed in the NT to operate alone, do their own thing, or make it up as they go along.

What Paul is describing here to Timothy is the essential sentiment of what we call discipleship. Paul and Timothy established a discipleship relationship in Acts 16 as Paul fulfilled the Great Commission making disciples everywhere

¹² By this time, Timothy had been mentored by Paul for approximately 15 years.

he went. Timothy was not the only person Paul called to discipleship, but the two certainly had a unique relationship.

We must also note that Paul himself was called to be a disciple by the Lord Jesus in Acts 9. A short time later, a man named Barnabas took a particular interest in Paul's discipleship and ministry. As a matter of fact, it was Barnabas who introduced Paul to the Apostles in Jerusalem when many other disciples doubted the sincerity of Paul's belief:

[W]hen Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles (Acts 9:26-27).

Following these events, Paul set out for his hometown of Tarsus. After some time, Barnabas specifically searched him out and brought him to conduct ministry at the church in Antioch (Acts 11:25-30; 13:1-3). This act led to an amazing work of the Holy Spirit as the Lord used these two men to plant churches and strengthen believers across the region.¹³

Paul was a disciple who made disciples. Timothy was one of those disciples who faithfully continued the work of calling others into the Kingdom to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Paul did not conduct discipleship merely by oral instruction (though certainly, that was a key element). One of the primary ways he disciplined people was by personal example. These two elements – teaching and personal

¹³ Paul and Barnabas would later part ways because of a disagreement over whether or not it was prudent to allow John Mark (the author of the Gospel of Mark) to accompany them in their ministry travels since he had deserted them in an earlier trip (cf. Acts 15:36-41).

example – go hand in hand, “follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me” (2 Tim 1:13).

It is not without significance that the word the ESV translates as “follow” is the Greek verb that means “to take a hold on someth[ing], have, hold (to), grip ... of holding fast to matters of transcendent importance.”¹⁴ This tells us that the pattern that Timothy is instructed to follow is not just theoretical but behavioral as well. What Timothy believes determines how Timothy ought to behave.¹⁵ The basis for this is the faith and love found in Christ and exemplified in Paul’s own personal example.

This exhortation toward discipleship is not for Timothy alone, but extends to the churches of the first century and into our modern era as well. Remember that Paul wrote to the Corinthians twice in the same letter urging them to follow his example: “Therefore I urge you, imitate me,” (1 Cor 4:16) *and* “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

As disciples of Jesus, we are to have people in our lives whom we look to as exemplary; people whose faith we endeavor to model as we seek to exemplify Christ in our own lives. If we ever get to the place in our discipleship where we are unteachable or out of fellowship and not being discipled, then we have lost our connection with the Body of Christ and with Christ’s own method of discipleship. If we ever get to the place where we believe that we have nothing else left to learn and do not have a “Paul” in our lives to encourage us in

¹⁴ ἔχω, Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 420.

¹⁵ ὑποτύπωσις, Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1042.

the faith and love found in Christ, then we have lost touch with the Body of Christ.

It is good and right to be a Paul (or Barnabas), and to call others to discipleship, while still maintaining the balance of being a Timothy – having more seasoned believers that we can learn from as they follow Jesus. By the precedent of Christ and the Apostles, faithfully preserved for us in Scripture, we can ensure that our discipleship matches that blessed example laid down for us. Timothy was doing just that; he was following the example set forth by Paul while pastoring and discipling the church at Ephesus.

Understand that the ideal Paul set forth for Timothy was based upon *sound words* — the Scriptural teachings that accord with the faith and love found in Christ, and not just simply his own intuition, whims, or preferred doctrines.

Remember that in 1 Timothy, Paul dedicated much time ensuring that Timothy did not get distracted by uncertain doctrines, myths, or speculative theology. Instead, Timothy was charged with the solemn duty to correct bad teaching and hold fast to sound teaching (1 Tim 1:3-11). Holding fast to and concentrating upon sound teaching, while rejecting spurious fringe doctrines, is a mark of healthy Biblical discipleship, and an ongoing participation in the grace of discipleship given to us by Christ Himself.

The question that modern Christians must reflect upon is: Is this happening in our lives? Whom are we discipling in the faith and love of Christ? By whom are we being disciplined?

Furthermore, let me add that if you feel supremely unqualified to say in agreement with Paul, “Imitate me,” or

“Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me,” you are not alone. Many Christians feel this way because our discipleship is often imperfect or inconsistent, *and* our disciple-makers turn out to be flawed (sometimes deeply) in one way or another. When we commit to true Jesus-centered discipleship, living life with one another, we get a front-row seat to human imperfection. Seeing one another’s very real humanity, flaws, theological wrinkles, and struggles with sin can be challenging. But that does not alleviate us of the Biblical imperative to do the thing!

In the midst of our imperfect discipleship we come face to face with and learn firsthand about big, radical, Biblical, transformative, Christ-like grace. And if we are patient in our discipleship with one another, we not only get a front-row seat to the mess of humanity, but we also get a front-row seat to the miracle of holiness that Christ is able to bring about in the lives of His people. That is a glorious prospect — that Christ brings about transformation in the lives of messy people by His grace; and if we are watching closely enough we will see it with our own eyes.

V. 14 By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

Moreover, Paul instructs Timothy to guard the good deposit with which he has been entrusted. We are presented here with the idea of *stewardship*. Timothy has been entrusted with a great responsibility to care for something that does not

intrinsically belong to him, but has been granted to him by Christ's grace for safekeeping.

The term *deposit* is used “only in the pastorals and always used w[ith] φυλάσσειν [phylassein, to guard], [speaking] of the spiritual heritage entrusted to the orthodox Christian.”¹⁶ Said another way, that good deposit entrusted to Timothy's care — the “spiritual heritage” of orthodox believers — is the gospel itself.¹⁷

The sense we get then is that Paul, Timothy, and all who are called to the Kingdom, especially those called to the pastoral work, are to steward the blessed gospel and secure it from corruption, erosion, manipulation, and any other vile influence that may be brought against it. In conjunction with the faithful work of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to strive to secure the gospel of Jesus Christ against those who would seek to pollute it.

The idea of stewardship, the requirement to care faithfully for the gifts the Lord has given us, is found throughout the NT (Matt 10:8, 24:42; Luke 16:1-13; 1 Cor 4:1-2; Gal 4:1-2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 4:10).¹⁸

In 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 Paul writes, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and *stewards* of the

¹⁶ παραθήκη, Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 764.

¹⁷ I. Howard Marshall and Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 714.

¹⁸ Two terms are used in the NT to speak to essentially the same function — ἐπίτροπος (manager, steward, foreman) and οἰκονόμος (householder, manager, steward).

mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (emphasis added).

Similarly, in 2 Tim 1:12, Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to *guard* until that day what has been entrusted to me” (emphasis added). Based on this declaration, we find that Christ bears the primary responsibility to guard and keep His gospel and those who belong to Him. And here in v. 14, we see the intersection of man’s responsibility with Christ’s sovereignty. Timothy, who most assuredly is being kept by Christ, is commanded to guard the deposit entrusted to him even as Christ is guarding that same deposit (v. 12). In this, we find that we are to be “God’s fellow workers” working with Him as He guards what is His (1 Cor 3:5).

But, how do we do this correctly? Not by human strength, aptitude, shrewdness, or business acumen but (as Paul instructs) by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us! We cannot hope to faithfully fulfill the role that Christ has called us to, which is to be faithful stewards or fellow workers with God, apart from the Holy Spirit, —God in us. It is the work of God in us (His Spirit) that enables us to guard that which He has committed to our care.

V. 15 You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes.

On this note of faithful stewardship, Paul shifts gears and gives an example of unfaithfulness in the work of the ministry identifying two people by name who had fallen

short. Undoubtedly Timothy would have been familiar with these two people as they are identified as being in Asia (modern-day Asia Minor or Western Turkey), of which Ephesus, where Timothy served, was the chief city.¹⁹

Sharing in that ubiquitous human experience, the Apostle Paul was no stranger to disappointment, and here he lays out for Timothy some of the disappointments he had experienced in ministry. While Paul expressly names two people who abandoned him (Phygelus and Hermogenes), his language indicates that many others also turned away from him (“*all who are in Asia*”).

We do not know exactly what caused these people to turn away from Paul. Based upon the context in 2 Tim 1:8, where Paul writes, “do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner,” we might assume that perhaps these people felt a sense of embarrassment or shame, and sought to relieve that feeling by simply cutting ties with him.

This much is certain: disappointments and abandonments in ministry will come because ministry is as human an endeavor as much as a divine one...and people are messy. We do not always know why people turn away; maybe that is for the best. However, as we faithfully hold to the gospel and follow Jesus, we will experience the same things that Jesus, Paul, and the other Apostles experienced.

Sadly, this is not Paul’s only example of abandonment in ministry. We find additional details about the disappointments

¹⁹ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary 34 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 197.

that Paul experienced in 2 Tim 4. He was in good company though. Jesus Himself experienced abandonment, which no doubt broke His heart. One tragic example of abandonment that Christians still struggle with occurred when Jesus taught the challenging truth that He is the bread of life, and that those who would have eternal life must consume the flesh and blood of Christ (John 6:53-59). The result of this teaching caused mass abandonment:

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, ‘Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.’ (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.’ *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him* (John 6:60-66, emphasis added).

We also have the example of abandonment by the Apostles following the arrest of Christ. While they professed to be made of stronger stuff, their own convictions failed them when the time came (Mark 14:50).

The best we can do when faced with abandonment and disappointment in ministry is rest in the peace of the Lord Jesus, faithfully keep the gospel that has been committed to us, love those whose strength of conviction fails, and fight against the ever-present temptation to be hardened by our

disappointments and hurt those who have hurt us. Only the grace of Christ will enable us for the task.

Vv. 16-18 May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me—may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day!—and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus.

Finally, in contrast to abandonment and disappointment, Paul presents an example of sterling faithfulness by a man named Onesiphorus. These verses are the only place in the NT that mention Onesiphorus, but what an outstanding commendation!²⁰

So far, Paul has sought to encourage Timothy to faithfulness, to share in suffering, and to not be ashamed of the gospel or Paul, his mentor. He has even gone so far as to provide Timothy with an explicit example of failure, abandonment, and potential shame.

All of this teaches us that Paul had a clear eye regarding ministry and the messy people we serve among who sometimes bring disappointment. However, even as Paul gave an example of many people in Timothy's own neck of the woods who had *abandoned* him, he now shows him what *fidelity*

²⁰ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992), 384.

looks like through the life of a not-so-famous Biblical figure – Onesiphorus.

While Timothy was hard at work in Ephesus and tempted to despair (2 Tim 1:4), and Paul was suffering his second imprisonment at the hands of the Roman government, not everyone had given up on Paul.

This man Onesiphorus sacrificially left his family ²¹ and traveled to Rome to seek out Paul and care for him. This is a beautiful example of the wonderful heart-lifting surprises of ministry. The Lord was not blind to Paul's circumstances. He knew that Paul needed some encouragement, refreshment, and fellowship, and he provided that in the touching ministry of Onesiphorus.

Onesiphorus, contra to those who had abandoned Paul, was not ashamed of Paul's chains and seemingly took great pains to find him and be with him. It seems, too, that serving was part of who Onesiphorus was in Christ's Kingdom. While nothing is known about him apart from these verses, we can glean from the text that he was a man who had a heart to serve. He faithfully served in Ephesus and made it his own personal business to travel a great distance just to serve Paul. This speaks to his great love for Paul and his Christ-like character of faithfulness.

This is something we should seek to exemplify in our own lives. Do you know any saints who are struggling, imprisoned, or living in less-than-ideal circumstances? It is our blessed honor to refresh them in their time of need.

²¹ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 384.

This act of service meant a great deal to Paul. Even as he began this letter by commending the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ to Timothy (2 Tim 1:2), he earnestly desired that Onesiphorus and his family would be blessed by Christ's mercy.²²

In accord with this thought, we as Christians deeply desire that our fellow believers would be blessed and profoundly affected by Christ's mercy. It is grace and mercy that Onesiphorus exemplified in visiting Paul because he knew the grace and mercy of Christ.

The great takeaway from all of this is that there is the way of abandonment — giving up on guarding the gospel entrusted to us in exchange for other things (sometimes even seemingly noble things); then there is the way of discipleship, stewardship, faithfulness, and mercy by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. The Scriptures are clear — God's desire for His people is the way of faithfulness by His Spirit.

May we seek to live by the Spirit, to guard what we have been entrusted with, and to refresh others along the way by the mercy of Christ.

²² The scholarly literature indicates that some believe Onesiphorus may have died at some point before returning home but the evidence is not conclusive.

CHAPTER 4 | 2 TIMOTHY 2:1-7

V. 1 You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,²³

Upon recounting examples of faithlessness and faithfulness in 2 Tim 1:15-18, Paul urged Timothy toward exemplary conduct in his own life, giving him specific instructions to be followed. The first is that he should be strengthened by nothing other than the grace that is in Jesus Christ.

In this portion of the text, Paul continues encouraging Timothy and calling him to the difficult task of sharing in suffering, and girding himself for the difficulties ahead. He appeals to the characteristics of endurance and perseverance required of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer. Paul does

²³ Most popular English Bible translations translate the Greek preposition ἐν (v. 1) as “in” (be strong *in* the grace) while the ESV translates the preposition as “by” (be strengthened *by* the grace). There is also some discussion on the translation of the term “strengthened.” The former example (be strong) chooses to translate the verb as present, active, imperative, while the latter example (be strengthened), which the ESV uses, retains the original Greek grammar as a present, passive, imperative. The exegetical significance is one between Timothy as the agent (present, active, imperative) or something outside of Timothy as the agent (present, passive, imperative – the grace that is in Christ Jesus being the agent that strengthens). It seems that the latter is to be preferred, though we must make allowance that this form may be in the middle voice, in which case either form is possible. For more information see Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 503–504.

this not in a heavy-handed or provocative fashion but by adopting the tone of a father with a child.

Remember that it was Paul who wrote, “Do not provoke your children to wrath, lest they become discouraged” (Col 3:21). So now, Paul encourages Timothy in the even-handed, steady, assured way of a loving father who not only knows all too well what suffering life has in store for their child but who ultimately desires their good, and that they should stand faithfully in the face of suffering. What did Paul offer his beloved child Timothy to bolster his strength and prepare him for the task ahead? The grace of Jesus.

Facing despair, separation, and an apparent faction of saints who had abandoned Paul in Ephesus, where Timothy labored, Paul reoriented Timothy on the grace that is in Jesus. And as we will see, it was the grace of Jesus that built up Timothy’s strength so that he could faithfully carry out the duties that had been entrusted to him and fulfill his calling and his role as a shepherd of God’s people.

Grace is at the center of all we do for Christ’s Kingdom! We can say this a million times and must still return to it repeatedly to internalize this truth. We must be strengthened daily in and by this grace. Since we have been saved by grace, we must perpetually seek to operate from a position of grace to fulfill God’s will in our lives individually and in unity as the church (Eph 2:8-10).

Notice that the grace of Jesus Christ is itself the strengthening agent. While many Christians have abused grace and twisted the term to excuse laziness and sin, we see that the expected effect of Christ’s grace on the believer’s life

is strength, endurance, and a heart to share in suffering for the gospel's sake.

When we feel weak, unqualified, and insufficient; when we look upon our own depleted arsenal of giftedness, and have exhausted all of our attempts to be better, do more, or be stronger in our own power, we are reminded that God's gift of grace, which exists outside of us and is applied to us by Jesus Christ, is the thing that makes us stronger. We need to be reminded of the centrality of grace at all times, knowing that at our lowest, God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:9-10).

V. 2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

Centered upon and strengthened by the grace of Christ, Paul instructed Timothy in one of the most critical tasks of pastoral ministry – to faithfully steward the gospel message and “to entrust [to others] for safekeeping”²⁴ the teaching that Paul had publicly declared. What Paul was entrusted with (2 Tim 1:12) and what Timothy was entrusted with (2 Tim 1:14) must be entrusted to others.

In 2 Tim 2:8, Paul defined the content of this deposit, which is to be entrusted to others (to be considered in the next chapter): “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel.”

The drumbeat of Paul's life since his conversion was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Please note that what Paul was saying

²⁴ παρατίθημι (*paratitheimi*), Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 772.

that Timothy needed to pass on to others was not some hidden knowledge or private revelation but well-known public instruction.²⁵

But why then was Timothy instructed to be discerning concerning whom he passed this on to if this teaching had already been declared publicly and witnessed by so many people? Context is our guide.

The Pastorals present a picture of the early church still getting their feet under them, striving mightily to define orthodoxy and orthopraxy: right belief and right practice. Some of their early so-called “teachers” erringly focused on debatable topics, speculative theology, myths, and even divisive religious practices. Timothy needed to be sure that the men who were to take on the role of true teachers in the church were, first and foremost, *faithful!*

Finding devoted men²⁶ who will faithfully steward the gospel, who will lay aside their own presuppositions for the sake of truth, and who will be shaped by the gospel rather than shaping it into their own image, is critical for the life of the church. AND — they are exceedingly rare. Proverbs presents to us this truth by way of rhetorical questioning:

²⁵ Marshall and Towner, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 726.

²⁶ The Greek term translated “men” is ἄνθρωπος (*anthropos*) which can also refer to humans in general irrespective of gender (versus the term ἀνήρ (*anebr*)/ἄνδρως (*andros*) which refers expressly to males), but the consulted commentary materials indicate that it seems most likely that Paul is referring to males in conjunction with the role of elders in the church. See Marshall and Towner, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 726. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 391. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 506.

“Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?” (Prov 20:6)

We do not need teachers who are overly convinced of their own rightness or denominational framework and view the Scriptures through a carefully curated systematic lens. Instead, we need teachers who are faithful to the gospel in all respects as declared by the Scriptures and who will faithfully pass that on to others.

We do not need teachers who will jealously hoard what they have learned in an attempt to demonstrate the secular concept that “knowledge is power” — teachers who are insecure and feel threatened by the prospect of others growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Instead, we need teachers who want to see the Kingdom advance and who rejoice to see other faithful people grow who will pass on the gospel to still more teachers who possess the characteristics of, and potential to be faithful to, the gospel.

We do not need more people who know a lot but are unwilling to teach and disciple others in faithfulness. The two qualities that Paul presents as exemplary here are *faithful* and *able*. These are the people we are looking for to steward the precious treasure of the gospel. Remarkably, no matter how many frauds have wandered into the pulpit (to their own peril, (James 3:1)), God has always gifted His church with faithful and able men — true stewards of the gospel.

In short, Timothy was instructed to find faithful men of strong character and to teach them faithfully to pass on the truths of the gospel to others.

V. 3 Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Verse 3 presents to us not only the invitation to share in suffering for the Kingdom but also the truth that those called to this task, like Timothy, will most certainly encounter suffering through faithfulness to the gospel. This should not surprise us. Later in this very letter, Paul writes, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12).

As an encouragement to the Philippians, Paul wrote, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29). Likewise, Jesus taught the disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Upon this exhortation to “soldier up” and to share in suffering, Matthew Henry writes,

Those who would approve themselves good soldiers of Jesus Christ must endure hardness; that is, we must expect it and count upon it in this world, must endure and accustom ourselves to it, and bear it patiently when it comes, and not be moved by it from our integrity.”²⁷

The theme of spiritual warfare pervades the New Testament. We find terms like enemy, armor of God, good fight, battle, war, etc.

These analogies mean much to me as I have spent significant time as a Soldier in my own life – bearing the

²⁷ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2361.

burden of the ruck, the heat, the cold, sleepless nights, long walks in the dark, and the chaos of war.

I have learned a few things about shared suffering during my time as a soldier. The first thing is that shared suffering brings people together like nothing else. Shared suffering establishes bonds between people just as strong as any blood relative. We call the men we have suffered with our brothers – and we mean it! They are our brothers born of battle, of suffering, and of hardship.

The second thing I have learned about shared suffering is that those moments when sleep is impossible, food is limited, and the comforts of home are only a distant memory, that is when we truly discover who is faithful.

I would suggest that as Paul implored Timothy to identify faithful men who can teach others, he indicated that one means of discerning faithfulness is in shared suffering. In pastoral work, those we look to as promising candidates to share in the work must be prepared for and, to some degree, *already* know suffering, and we must know it together.

No amount of credentialing or easy-living can convince me that those who desire to put their hand to the plow are prepared until we suffer together! It is in the suffering that we find out who our true brothers are, born of the battle, who will “have our back,” who will help us limp to the objective when the battle rages on, and who will not quit when life gets messy. In this way, Paul encourages Timothy to stand firm, to dig deep, and to do so by the grace of Christ.

V. 4-7 No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

Paul goes on to develop this thought by employing three examples: a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. The meaning of these illustrations is a topic of some debate in the scholarly literature. Some seek to harmonize these illustrations, and unsurprisingly, some seek to develop Paul's thought beyond what he intended. However, we know from the context that Paul was intentionally sparse in his instruction here as he concluded these brief illustrations with the admonition, "Think over what I say *because the Lord will give you understanding.*"

Paul is giving Timothy something to chew on here. There are times when Paul is very clear, and there are times, like this, when Paul is intentionally vague, using the contrast as a teaching device. Sometimes it is good to present the truth in terms that spur individual thought and meditation *and*, more importantly, prompt a cry from the student, "Teach me, Lord, I don't understand!" We can be sure that as we consider these things, the Lord will teach us the meaning.

One thing we can say about these three roles is that the common thread for each (soldier, athlete, farmer) is endurance, perseverance, and grit.

As we started with grace, we must ask, “Does our understanding of grace marry with these rough looking figures: soldier, athlete, farmer? Does grace empower us to have grit, be soldiers, and persevere?” Some Christians think not! They think grace is a license for unrighteousness (Rom 6:1-2). Not so! Grace is what enables us to endure, to persevere!

The Soldier who volunteers to endure suffering focuses on the mission and on carrying out the orders of his commanding officer. This bears out practically in the life of a Christian as we wage a spiritual battle, not one of flesh and blood, at the behest and command of the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 6:12). We seek to please God, accomplish His work, and endure suffering as we carry out our commission.

Athletes discipline their bodies to be in the best shape possible and possess the greatest possible endurance, but they also want to win! And *since* they want to win, they have committed themselves to understanding the guiding principles of their contest so that they do not become disqualified by falling short in some way.

Please know this is not legalism! Paul himself expressed his understanding of this principle when he wrote to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified (1 Cor 9:24-27).

It is interesting that one of the talking points of the emergent church culture in the 1990s was that Christianity is not just a bunch of rules; it is about a relationship. That is true, to a point. The problem with that sentiment is that it treats the two concepts as mutually exclusive – either rules or relationship. This, however, is resolved in Jesus’ teaching, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me” (John 14:21, NKJV).

Here is the problem with “rules.” The Bible presents to us a variety of principles, imperatives, and even prohibitions – not in order to impart righteousness to us (that comes by Christ alone), but because you can tell if athletes are qualified by how they run their race and whether or not they have committed to “fair-play” or are “out of bounds”!

Likewise, farmers demonstrate incredible patience, endurance, and faithfulness in their work. They sow, not knowing what the coming year will bring – weather, blight, drought, parasites, a good harvest, or a failure. Still, they diligently care for their crops day after day, and by this, they demonstrate another critical component of all three of these occupations: hope.

It is hope that fuels the soldier’s heart on the forlorn battlefield. It is hope that fuels the athlete competing until his lungs feel as if they are about to burst. It is hope that

compels the farmer to care for what he has sown day after day, trusting that there will be a harvest (Matt 9:37-38).²⁸

Paul has appealed to all these things in order to demonstrate the spiritual truth that believers are a people strengthened by grace and encouraged to share in suffering by endurance, perseverance, and commitment to God's standards of holiness. In this example we may have hope that the Lord will bring about a victory, a reward, and a harvest in due time according to His will and for His eternal glory.

Press on Christian. Meditate upon these things. The Lord will give you understanding in everything.

²⁸ Various interpretations have been suggested for "partaking of the harvest," ranging from pastoral support to missionary work and even a future eschatological reward. It seems best to focus less on the interpretive possibilities of what partaking in the harvest means and rather to focus upon the continuity of thought related to endurance and perseverance carried over from the previous verses. For more information on interpretive possibilities see Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 395.

CHAPTER 5 | 2 TIMOTHY 2:8-13

These verses are thematically connected to the preceding material. Perhaps it would be better to consider the combined material as a whole, but I have endeavored to present the work in a manageable way to allow for a careful, systematic, and detailed examination of the text: focusing upon its presentation of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the apostolic example set before us, and its bearing on our lives as we seek to live out the gospel.

God's Word should not be merely an exercise in academics. It is not simply "some book" that we are trying to "get through" so we can unlock some sort of personal achievement. If that ever becomes our goal, then we have missed the point altogether! There is truth and life to be found in God's Word; that is why we are taking our time to examine the Word carefully, to know it, internalize it, and be shaped by it.

To that end, we will persevere in the task at hand with the Lord's help, seeking to apply ourselves to these words and these words to our lives.

Sometimes in Paul's writings (and the Bible as a whole) we find ourselves in the midst of theological territory that opens itself to various interpretive positions. Sometimes we are presented with theological truths that make our heads spin. Peter indicated as much in 2 Peter 3:15-16, when he wrote,

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you

according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

However, even as Paul presents to us some things that are hard to understand, we are also presented with portions of Scripture that are plain enough, and in which the application is readily understandable. That is the territory in which we find ourselves now.

I am not suggesting that Bible scholars have not exhausted much ink on the subject matter. Certainly, they have. It is in our nature to do so. We find thinking and writing about these things a great joy and honor. We *get* to mine the depths of God's riches! It is a great blessing.

What we have before us is a great reminder to carry forward into our lives that which we observe and interpret in the Scriptures. This is what we call application.

So far in this letter, Paul has encouraged Timothy to share in suffering, provided an example of both faithlessness and faithfulness, has called him to endurance and perseverance by way of illustration (soldier, athlete, farmer), and has called him to guard the good deposit and to entrust the good deposit to others. This is all application!

But Paul presses further. The verses we are considering are essentially a recap of all that has come before, culminating in an early Christian hymn that neatly distills the truths that Paul has been driving home.

V. 8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel,

In verse 8 Paul dives right into the primary basis for all of the application he has presented thus far.

How is it possible to share in suffering for the gospel's sake without losing heart? What is that good deposit that Timothy (and, by extension, the church itself) was to pass on to the faithful? What is the prime example of faithfulness by which we measure all attempts? It is Christ!

In verse 7, after presenting a series of illustrations communicating the need for endurance and perseverance, Paul told Timothy to “think over what I say.” Now, Paul urges Timothy to another cognitive task – *remember*.

Incidentally, this reminds us that our faith is a thinking faith — a faith that engages the mind as well as the spirit, heart, and even our physical bodies. To neglect any one of these is to have an incomplete grasp of the magnitude of God's holy Word.

The answer to our questions; the who, what, where, when, why, and how of endurance, suffering, the good deposit, discipleship, and any other aspect of our faith, is *bound up* in this exhortation: Remember Jesus Christ, the God-man who conquered death and demonstrated the power of the cross in reconciling sinful people to God, as promised beforehand by God Himself to be born the son of David.

Jesus Christ is the crux of our faith! As D.L Moody wrote, “Him—mark you—not a dogma, not a creed, not a myth, but a person!”²⁹

We could go further. It is not moralism, niceness,³⁰ an academic exercise, or the fulfillment of some desire for purpose, meaning, or prosperity. It is Christ alone! Holding this in our memory is critical to living the life we are called to live in Christ and to bear up in the face of suffering, as Paul further explains.

Vv. 9-10 for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

It was *because of* the gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul suffered. Note this carefully. Paul understood the reality of his situation, bound with chains like a common criminal, exactly *because of* his work gospel. And yet, Paul did not abandon the gospel to seek an easier life or to avoid being viewed as a criminal.

In fact, by all indications, Paul was exceedingly aware that the suffering that befell him during his ministry was part of

²⁹ D. L. Moody, *The D. L. Moody Year Book: A Living Daily Message from the Words of D. L. Moody*, ed. Emma Moody Fitt (East Northfield, MA: The Bookstore, 1900), 10.

³⁰ Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People*, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 17-30.

the will of God. In fact the Lord had promised this suffering would occur in Paul's life to a man named Ananias during Paul's conversion. Here's what he said,

Go, for he [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name (Acts 9:15-16).

In some sense, having exhorted Timothy so strongly to endure suffering, Paul sets himself forth as an example to be followed.³¹ This, of course, fits with Paul's earlier fatherly instruction (2:1). Paul was not one to preach, "Do as I say, not as I do." He presented in his own life, at great personal cost, an example of faithfulness and endurance that he desired others to follow.

Furthermore, in the midst of his bondage and suffering, Paul reminded Timothy that "the word of God is not bound." No matter what appearances may be or how severe the persecution against Christians may become, God's Word is not chained! We appeal again to the wisdom of D.L. Moody, who wrote,

I can see one of your modern freethinkers standing near Christ, and he hears Him say: 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My Words shall not pass away.' [Matt 24:35] I see the scornful look on his face as

³¹ John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy," in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. James Tweed and Philip Schaff, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series 13 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 489. See also Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2361.

he says: ‘Hear that Jewish peasant talk! Did you ever hear such conceit, such madness? He says heaven and earth shall pass away, but His Word shall not pass away.’ My friend, I want to ask you this question—has it passed away? Do you know that the sun has shone on more Bibles today than ever before in the history of the world? ... They tried in the dark ages to burn it, to chain it, and keep it from the nations, but God has preserved it, and sent it to the ends of the earth.³²

Moreover, Paul understood that his sanctified suffering, while in accordance with God’s will, was for the benefit of others. This helps us answer, in part, the question, “Why does God allow His people to experience suffering?” It is for others! For the elect! For the consecrated people of God who are being built up by the unfettered Word of God, and to bring about the salvation of those who by faith receive the grace of God unto eternal life and eternal glory.

The promise of the gospel is not merely temporal, for the here and now. We look forward to an eternity with Christ in glory. This promise strengthens us in our suffering when we realize that we are sojourners in a strange land (1 Peter 2:11), citizens of a holy Kingdom (Phil 3:20), and ambassadors of the Most High King Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:20). Though we may be chained, mocked, beaten, and abused, who can stand against us (Rom 8:31)?

Vv. 11-13 The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will

³² Moody, *D. L. Moody Year Book*, 10–11.

deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.

Paul now quite poetically encapsulates all that he has set forth in his writing so far by employing what many believe to have been an early Christian hymn.³³

The importance of early Christian hymns and creeds cannot be understated because they demonstrate that the church began to codify orthodox belief very early on. This would have been, and still is, exceedingly important in the battle against heresy. In part, this is why it is crucial to examine our own use of hymns to ensure that they are not just musically catchy, but also truthful.

See how Paul’s earlier writings in this epistle are distilled and paralleled here. The focus of this hymn begins with our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, which reminds us of Paul’s words in v. 8: “Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead.”

It then shifts to the need for endurance, which Paul has certainly spent much time defining as he called Timothy to “share in suffering” and further set forth the examples of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer as positive examples of faithfulness.

Finally, this hymn concludes with a warning against faithlessness by denying Christ contrasted against the unchangeable faithfulness of Christ. Remember that Paul

³³ Marshall disagrees with this assessment, but it is not unheard of that Paul would rely on early Christian hymns to reinforce his teaching (Eph 1:3-14, 5:14; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20; and 1 Tim 3:16). Marshall and Towner, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 739.

gave a heart-breaking example of faithlessness in the lives of those who had abandoned him (and probably the gospel as well (1:15)). He then presented affirming examples of faithfulness in his life (vv. 9-10) and in the life of Onesiphorus (1:16-18).

Let's go deeper. In this "trustworthy saying," Paul appeals to the believer's position in Christ by alluding to participating in the death and life of Christ, which may be viewed as our part in the fundamental ordinance of baptism.

Paul writes to the Romans,

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be [in the likeness] of [His] resurrection" (Rom 6:3-5, NKJV).

Our participation in Christ's death and resurrection requires faithfulness and endurance. We must share in suffering for the gospel's sake, all the while being mindful of the severe consequences visited upon those who deny Christ in an attempt to avoid the suffering that Paul has described.

The consequences for apostasy, for turning away from Jesus, are severe! If we deny Him, He will deny us! Jesus taught this plainly in Matt 10:32-33,

Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.

Moreover, we can be sure that Jesus is faithful to His word, even the hard parts.

This does not mean that any Christian who stumbles momentarily is in danger of hell fire. Paul does not write, “If you mess up, then you are sure to be fried on the last day.” Instead, he writes, “If we deny Him, He will deny us.” The beauty of our security in Christ is that we have the opportunity to repent when we fail. Proverbs 24:16 offers to us this principle, “For the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.”

Our momentary failure does not necessarily equate to a denial of Jesus. We are weak, yet we live by the power of God as the Holy Spirit forms us into His likeness. In such instances of failure, we must examine ourselves to see whether or not we are in the faith.

Paul is quite clear on this when he writes to the Corinthians,

For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! (2 Cor 13:4-5)

Even as we are assured that Christ is faithful to His Word, which includes the judgment of those who turn away from the gospel, Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown note that in these

verses, “indirectly, comfort is suggested to believers, that He is faithful to His promises to them.”³⁴

We must take this in all its shades. Christ is faithful to bring about the ultimate judgment of the unfaithful who deny their Redeemer. AND...it is the steadfast faithfulness of Christ that undergirds us, holds us, and compels us to endurance and steadfastness. As Paul reminded the Thessalonians,

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (1 Thess 5:23-24).

It is Christ we look to, Christ we remember, and Christ who is faithful. He will surely bring our faith to its perfect end.

³⁴ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 2:424.

CHAPTER 6 | 2 TIMOTHY 2:14-19

Continuing to instruct Timothy in the pastoral task at hand, Paul gives instructions in these verses concerning what is worth our primary efforts: avoiding controversial semantic debates, handling God’s Word rightly, and emphasizing the primary distinguishing characteristic of those who belong to the Lord. This is a repudiation of arguing with others over the meanings of words, concepts, or empty talk but instead focuses on the “so-what” of doctrine — turning away from sin.

V. 14 Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.

To get a firm grasp on this verse, we have to ask ourselves two questions. The first is: *Who* is Paul referring to when he instructs Timothy to remind *them* of these things? The second is: *What* are “these things”?

Regarding the first question (who?), we may gather from the context that Paul is referring to the church under Timothy’s pastoral care. Some have sought to further delineate this audience as referring to teachers, overseers, pastors, or simply to Timothy himself, but we may safely say that even if that were the case, those people are also part of

the church.³⁵ We may also add that if Paul specifically has the overseers, elders, pastors, and teachers in mind, it remains necessary for those people who bear the responsibility of shepherding God's people to pass along these instructions to the congregations they care for.

Regarding the second question, we are challenged with deciding which of "these things" Paul is referring to. What exactly is Timothy supposed to remind them of? Is he referring to what he has already written, to what follows, or to the whole body of instruction in this epistle?

It seems too narrow to focus only on what immediately precedes or follows. Certainly, all of Paul's apostolic instruction to the church is worthy of remembrance. That is why we endeavor to understand the whole counsel of God, each verse and chapter in context and in relation to the entirety of Scripture.

By maintaining a firm grasp on the truth presented in the Scriptures, we can obey the imperative here: Don't argue over words (my paraphrase)! That is to say, part of the role of a pastor (following the example Paul sets forth) is to remind himself and the church not to get sucked into dubious arguments about word meanings and whether or not there is another "hidden" meaning over and above what has been commonly accepted by the church, or something that has not been plainly presented in the Scriptures. All that to say, we

³⁵ Marshall and Towner, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 745–746.

ought not to be entangled in fighting with others over matters that are not essential to the faith.³⁶

Here Paul describes this particular form of argumentation as disputing with one another or “splitting hairs” over words.³⁷ Arichea and Hatton suggest, “Another way of expressing controversy and disputes about words is to ‘argue and quarrel with other people about the meaning of words.’”³⁸ They go on to say, “It is not only individual words that are meant but various kinds of teachings and doctrines.”³⁹

This is the second time Paul has used the same language to describe a phenomenon that takes place within the church: divisive infighting over empty arguments. That type of behavior is to be actively avoided. And yet, we are certainly aware that this type of argumentation over non-essentials is quite prevalent!

In 1 Tim 6:3-4, Paul referred to divisive, false teachers who have been infected with a sickness that drives them to quarreling and semantic wrangling.⁴⁰ Paul says that those with this unnatural fixation on controversy are arrogant and

³⁶ For a great primer on the essentials of the faith see Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

³⁷ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 598.

³⁸ Daniel C. Arichea and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 143.

³⁹ Arichea and Hatton, *Paul's Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, 206.

⁴⁰ Arichea and Hatton, *Paul's Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, 143.

conceited. They actually understand nothing, and their teaching produces envy, slander, and evil suspicions. Their teaching is harmful rather than fruitful.

In Romans 16:17-18, Paul instructs the church on how to handle such people by writing:

I appeal to you, brothers, to ***watch out*** for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; ***avoid them***. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive (emphasis added).

Too many Christians have been wounded by people who have weaseled their way into the church and sought to stroke their egos by becoming experts in the unimportant, weaponizing their trivial knowledge to gain personal power all while wounding others in the process.

The most common doctrines used by Christians to divide ourselves range from the serious to the silly. On the serious end of the spectrum, including issues that deserve some careful theological thought, we find that we are often prone to divide over issues such as: covenant theology v. dispensationalism, election v. freewill, continuationists v. cessationists, complementarians v. egalitarians, perspectives on the prophetic and the end times (eschatology), the creation narrative (literal v. figurative/poetic), infant baptism v. believer's baptism, the Christian's relationship to the Mosaic law, and so forth. Now toward the silly end of the spectrum we see issues such as: what kind of clothes should somebody wear at church, contemporary worship v. traditional hymns, are tattoos a condemnable sin, and more.

Nearly all of these debates, in their ugliest form, rely on some measure of quarreling over words, “missing the forest for the trees,” as it were.

It is safe to say that all these topics have been debated vehemently and, sadly, sometimes violently. Sometimes Christians are the worst persecutors of God’s people. We are quick with the heretic label and slow with grace. We are sometimes too quick to quarrel over word meanings to support our preferred position, and in its most dangerous form, we forget grace altogether.

Pastor Chuck Smith once wrote on divisive doctrines noting that it is easy for us to fall into legalism when we become overly concerned with one doctrine or another. These things may have some good points, but so does a porcupine. “If you embrace them too forcefully, it’s going to hurt.”⁴¹

In their most destructive state, some Christians have laid aside the Scriptures altogether to justify their preferred position in an attempt to appease the sensibilities of those within their preferred tribe (and even unbelievers!), seeking to please men rather than God (Gal 1:10). Within that brand of bad, man-pleasing theology, often coupled with an unhealthy fixation on debatable topics, some have invented every form of reader-response hermeneutic to attempt to validate their views.

“Hermeneutics describes the principles people use to understand what something means, to comprehend what a

⁴¹ Chuck Smith, “Calvary Chapel Distinctives” (Costa Mesa: The Word for Today, 2020), 53.

message—written, oral, or visual—is endeavoring to communicate.”⁴² A reader-response hermeneutic is a form of Biblical interpretation that seeks to interpret the Scriptures through the lens of the reader’s experiences, presuppositions, and pre-understandings. The key to this interpretive method is based primarily upon how the reader feels about, or is moved by, the text.

Blomberg and Klein write, “We must attribute the variety of interpretations to the interpreters....First, interpreters want, perhaps even unconsciously, to read the evidence in certain ways. Second, for various reasons they may be blinded to other alternatives. Or perhaps it is a bit of both.”⁴³

This has led to various interpretive methods that seek to advance very specific goals, including liberation theology, cultural criticism (a branch of liberation theology), feminist theology, and LGBTQ hermeneutics. All of these interpretive methods are carefully curated to support their particular cause.⁴⁴

In light of all these differing methods of interpretation how do we know which topics are merely controversial, non-essential semantic arguments and which are essential to the faith? How are we to know if we have erringly crafted an interpretive method to curate Scripture merely to validate our own worldview? How is that any better than the advocacy

⁴² William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 40.

⁴³ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*, 276.

⁴⁴ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*, 144.

groups mentioned above? The Bible itself provides the answer and reinforces the warning to avoid babbling on about uncertainties.

Vv. 15-17a Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of Truth. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.

The Bible teacher must diligently apply their self to handling God's Word as one who is approved. The Greek term for approved (*δοκιμος*, *dokimos*) means "being genuine on the basis of testing, approved (by test), tried and true."⁴⁵

There must be an element of testing to prove the Bible teacher is legitimate and will honestly handle God's Word, presenting the truth as recorded for us, and taking the Bible on its own terms.

The Bible teacher, the one who handles God's Word, must also hold a deep sense of understanding that they are to present themselves to God! We who teach and preach God's Word are answerable to God for how we handle it! That is part of the reason James writes, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). This warning is not to be taken lightly! There is a gravity to the task of handling God's Word that can never be overstated. With that in mind, those who teach the Bible must endeavor

⁴⁵ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 256.

diligently to handle it carefully and allow themselves to be handled by it!

BDAG comments on the language Paul uses in this verse by noting that it “means [to] guide the Word of Truth along a straight path (like a road that goes straight to its goal), without being turned aside by wordy debates or impious talk ... teach the word aright, expound (it) soundly, shape rightly, and preach fearlessly.”⁴⁶

To that end, the Bible teacher must interpret and expound upon the text in a way that seeks primarily to understand and present what the author intended to say to the original audience within its grammatical, historical, and literary context.⁴⁷ We are not seeking to determine how the text makes us feel, but rather what God has said through His Holy Spirit to His church. In doing so, we rely on the Scriptures as the final authority regarding faith and practice. Furthermore, we reject any attempts to subvert the original meaning of the text to satisfy our modern sensibilities. That is to say, that as we try our very best to handle the Word of Truth rightly, we are not trying to shape the Scriptures to fit our preferred narrative or doctrinal presuppositions. Instead, we are seeking to allow the Scriptures to shape our cultural sensibilities, our narrative, and our doctrinal beliefs. The Word of God, rightly divided, is the final authority.

Contra to that understanding, some have abandoned this position and dedicated their efforts to poisoning God’s

⁴⁶ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 722.

⁴⁷ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 263–264.

church by persisting in pointless babble. Paul tells us that, unfortunately, those efforts have a disastrous effect on the church, lead believers into sin, and spread like a disease infecting all it touches. The cure? Handle the Word of Truth rightly and submit ourselves to it regardless of how we may be challenged by the truth. After all, we are sanctified by the truth, not our opinions and fixations on the uncertain.

As Jesus prayed to the Father: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

Vv. 17b-18 Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.

Here Paul gives an explicit example of two people who had abandoned handling the Scriptures faithfully and had given themselves over to spreading doctrinal disease in the church – Hymenaeus and Philetus.

In 1 Tim 1:20, Paul wrote about this same Hymenaeus, saying that he had delivered him over to Satan so that he might learn not to blaspheme. What an indictment! So there is an established precedent for dealing with false teachers firmly. There is a time to say, “You’re done here, be on your way.” And we must be sensitive to that.

These two false teachers had departed from the truth to a particular form of controversial teaching that was

devastating⁴⁸ to some Christians — bad teaching about the resurrection.

It appears that the particular heresy these people were promoting included unbiblical ideas about how Christians relate to Christ's resurrection (1 Cor 15; 2 Thess 2:1-2) and this was the seed of gnosticism that would come into full bloom in the second century.⁴⁹

This is what happens when Bible teachers turn from the truth of the Bible to their own whims. As a result, people get hurt and grow distrustful of the Bible or the church because they have experienced manipulation and false doctrine at the hands of somebody who failed to handle God's Word rightly. However, there is an encouragement to the saints here and a litmus test of sorts to discern right teaching and practice.

V. 19 But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

In this verse, Paul appeals to Scripture itself, rightly handling the Word of Truth by alluding to such verses as Num 16:5, 26; Nah 1:7, and potentially even his own writing to the Corinthians in 1 Cor 8:3.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ The term used for "upsetting" is not referring to being mildly emotionally upset but to "jeopardize someone's inner well-being, upset, ruin." Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 74.

⁴⁹ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 528.

⁵⁰ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 416.

These verses speak to the fact that God knows those who are His. The primary marker of those who belong to God is not theological cleverness or expertise; it is turning away from sin. One of the best ways to gauge Bible teachers is to look for the fruit on their branches and the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Jesus taught this during the Sermon on the Mount:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits (Matt 7:15-20).

How are we to know good Bible teachers (and solid Christians in general) instead of false prophets? By their fruits! You see, the people in and around Jerusalem and Judea were surrounded by a relatively educated and no doubt committed religious class, the Pharisees. They made a big deal out of everything and missed the main thing (Christ) standing right in front of them. Let us learn from this historic example.

Now, let me add a word of caution: This does not suggest that we have a free license to be hyper-critical of others. Criticality is nothing more than pride. If we write off God-fearing, faithful Bible teachers because they do not affirm our particular non-essential pet doctrine or they do not affirm our cleverly crafted semantic argument, we have placed ourselves in a dangerous position where we are not discerning the fruit

in their lives, but we are seeking to affirm our own opinions. In this state, we are prone to become hardened, unteachable, and unloving, abandoning grace for arguments over words while missing the main thing – Christ. Let it not be so.

Rather, by God's help, let us leave aside fruitless quibbling over that which is uncertain and apply ourselves to handle God's Word rightly, not simply to be smarter but for the eternal benefit of God's people. Neither let us forget the mark of God's people, not simply being theologically polished, but turning from sin and bearing the good fruits of righteousness produced in us by God's Spirit and Word. Finally, let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.

CHAPTER 7 | 2 TIMOTHY 2:20-26

In the previous material, Paul instructed Timothy to avoid controversial arguments. He also called out two specific people who were engaging in such things and described how their fixation with heretical teaching on the resurrection was ruining the faith of some Christians. Paul further said that the mark of godliness is turning away from sin.

The implications of Paul's instruction on avoiding controversial, empty talk (not getting sucked into debates over word meanings, even if they are theologically framed) is that Christians are not known by God for their debating prowess. Instead, we are known by God and others in the faith by our lives, and by turning away from sin and pursuing holiness. As Jesus taught,

Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them. And I will love them and reveal myself to each of them (John 14:21, NLT).

Living a life sanctified unto God ought to be at the forefront of our efforts over and above disputing with others over controversial topics.

Paul continues to explain this with an illustration. He presents an example of a great house and the objects within that house as emblematic of how we, as the church, are to conduct ourselves.

The great house Paul speaks of represents the church, and the various vessels represent those within the church. This is

an apt reminder of Paul's previous instruction to Timothy in 1 Tim 3:14-15,

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

Vv. 20-22 Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

This word “vessel” (σκεῦος/*skenos*) means “a container of any kind, vessel, jar, [or] dish.”⁵¹ This concept of a vessel occurs from time to time in Paul's other writings. In 2 Cor 4:7, Paul describes our condition, that we are vessels designed to hold the gospel. He also emphasizes our fragility, writing, “[W]e have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” Something so powerful (the gospel) is contained within something so fragile (people), made of clay, as it were.

⁵¹ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 927.

He also uses similar language in Rom 9:20-23 while communicating God's sovereignty and prerogative in forming various vessels for His own purposes,

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.⁵²

God makes different vessels and appoints them in His great house for different purposes: some for honorable use and some for dishonorable use. This is a difficult saying. And if this is treated improperly, it may cause some Christians to despair and think, "Maybe God has created me for wrath or for dishonor." The issue is not yet settled!

When we look at God's cupboard and examine His dishes (including ourselves), how are we to know who is set apart as holy for an honorable use and who has been set apart for dishonorable purposes? How do we know the difference between fine china and a spaghetti-stained Tupperware container? What if two vessels look identical? How does all of this work out? What role does the vessel itself have in all of this?

Paul's analogy on various vessels in the same house sounds similar to a teaching that Jesus offered in Matt 13:24-30:

⁵² Cf. 2 Peter 2:3 and Jude 1:4. For further discussion, research the doctrine of reprobation.

He put another parable before them, saying, “The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

This is another picture of God’s great house — His Kingdom, His church. There are so many different types of people, but in both illustrations, the people are essentially divided into two distinct groups. Some are fruitful and good, and some are unfruitful, divisive, and even dangerous, even though they may look just like anybody else.

Paul indicates that we who are appointed as vessels, jars of clay, gold, silver, or wood, each have different functions, *but* based upon how we respond to God’s will, we can be set apart for an honorable and good purpose in God’s house. How so? The vessel must be cleansed! As a matter of fact, Paul says, “If anyone cleanses himself from these things he will be a vessel for honor.”⁵³ This reinforces the earlier admonition in v. 19, “Let everyone who names the name of

⁵³ The ESV translates the Greek demonstrative pronoun τούτων (*toutōn*) which literally means “of these things” as “what is dishonorable.”

the Lord depart from iniquity.” This begs the questions: How are we cleansed? How do we cleanse ourselves?

Each of us has a past, and not many of us would account ourselves as “vessels of honor” based upon our own pasts and known sin. I suspect that not many Christians view themselves as precious gold vessels even though God views us that way.

We tend to measure ourselves through the prism of our failures. We see and sometimes ruminate upon our flaws, even though we have been set apart as holy by the person, work, and righteousness of Jesus Christ. That can lead to stagnation and hopelessness in our lives even while we may openly profess that we have been made new in Christ.

To answer the question of how to be cleansed and participate in that process, we can appeal to 1 John 1:7-9,

[I]f we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So part of being cleansed and sanctified is not denying our failures, or sins, but confessing them, walking in the light, and allowing Christ to cleanse us.

We must also note that the key to being cleansed is not found within ourselves (Gal 3); we must allow ourselves to be cleansed by Christ. We must participate in this openly, freely confessing our faults and trusting that Christ will set us apart for His purposes. Inasmuch as we are recipients of Christ’s cleansing work, we are also called to be active participants in this process. As the psalmist muses, “How can a young man

cleansed his way? By taking heed according to Your word” (Psalm 119:9, NKJV).

The mark of sincere Christian devotion is to be cleansed from that which is dishonorable — from sin — by taking heed to the Word of God. As our will is brought into alignment with God’s will by His Spirit and Word, we are set apart, sanctified, unto God and His good and honorable purposes. George Knight comments,

[G]old and silver vessels are esteemed as honorable because they are used for honorable functions. Similarly, wood and earthenware vessels are regarded as dishonorable because they are used for garbage or excrement and are sometimes thrown out with their contents. The implication is that there may indeed be vessels like the false teachers in the professing Christian community, but their activity [how they live] indicates that they are dishonorable.⁵⁴

Paul also adds one extremely practical word on sanctification and holiness: “flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (v. 22).

Part of allowing ourselves to be cleansed, heeding God’s Word, and being set apart as holy for God’s good work, includes the very practical obedience of running away from youthful passions which “primar[ily] focus on sexual desires.”⁵⁵

Remember that Timothy was a young man subject to the same temptations as all young people, and there is no denying

⁵⁴ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 418.

⁵⁵ Arichea and Hatton, *Paul’s Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, 216.

that sexual impropriety has derailed many a promising servant of God. The solution? Run away! Don't linger! We are not strong enough to conquer that insidious sin in our own might (Prov 7:9-27).

The imperative to flee from sexual passions is quite serious and not to be trifled with or ignored because the subject makes us uncomfortable. James 4:7 instructs us to “resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Nevertheless, we are commanded to *flee* from youthful lusts. That is a curious teaching that informs us of just how dangerous this kind of situation is. Did you catch that? If we resist the devil, *he will flee from us*, but when it comes to sexual lusts, *we are commanded to flee* (1 Cor 6:18).

Instead, those who are cleansed by God and set apart for His purposes are to set off in the other direction pursuing and chasing after righteousness, faith, love, and peace, all of which are found in Christ. And notice that this is not a solo pursuit but something that we are to do “along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” Our pursuit of these things is a team effort, and our team is Christ's holy church.

V. 23 Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.

With all of this in mind, Paul reinforces his earlier instructions on avoiding foolish argumentation that he set forth in vv. 14-17. The sense we get is that God's people are to be holy, not “holier than thou.” God's people are set apart

for good works, not to be condescending know-it-alls prone to get “wrapped around the axle” on non-essentials.

The command here is plain: “Have nothing to do” with the types of controversial, Christian-sounding quarrels that surface from time to time. Those kinds of arguments only produce more fighting and division, but not holiness. As God’s people, we are to be in pursuit of knowing Christ, being known by Him, and being marked by His holiness.

Vv. 24-26 And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Here Paul addresses how those who serve the Lord, maybe especially in a pastoral role, are to respond to opposition and to those whose efforts are consumed with controversy and doubtful doctrines.

Before proceeding, it bears mentioning that even the most theologically buttoned-up, godly servants in the church will face opposition. Paul, that stalwart apostle, faced much opposition throughout his life. Timothy, whom the NT presents to us as a commendable servant of the Lord, faced opposition. The NT is replete with examples of people finding their way into the church, God’s great house, and positioning themselves as vessels of honor while actually

sowing discord, division, and heresy; opposing sound doctrine and those faithful servants who shepherd God's people.

This should not surprise us. We should expect to face the same things even in the most committed, Christ-centered churches. There are those among the flock who are simply seeking to find fault and stir up trouble. Be warned, sowing discord among God's people is an abomination in God's eyes (Prov 6:16-19). Paul describes these kinds of people as those who have been taken captive by the devil to do his will. The devil, the father of lies (John 8:44), loves sowing discord and division among God's people. *But...* how are we to respond?

Sometimes our human nature kicks in, and we want so badly to defend our work, our reputation, and our commitment to Biblical principles. Sometimes if we are not careful, we can approach opposition in the flesh and not in the Spirit. If we take that approach we may very well find ourselves directly violating God's Word while claiming to defend the Bible and God's people. We may even seek to "fight fire with fire." In such cases, it is more common than not that everybody gets burned in the process, including innocent bystanders. So here, Paul offers an alternative approach – gentleness – which is not at all intuitive to us.

In 1 Cor 4:21, Paul offered this rhetorical question to those stirring up trouble in the Corinthian church: "What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" It is not too much of a stretch to assume that most of us would prefer gentleness.

The ability to teach with gentleness should mark even our conflicts with those who cause controversy. The reason for this approach is that God's will in such matters is gentle instruction that brings about repentance, not retribution. It is easy to lash out at others and bring the hammer down on those we believe need a firm hand. We may even justify force in the noble cause of protecting the Body. However, the Bible calls for gentleness with the end goal of provoking repentance in the hearts of those who oppose sound doctrine and reconciliation in the house of God.

Gayle Erwin presents a moving illustration on how we *could* deal with others gently in his book *The Jesus Style*:

The Sun and the North Wind observed a man walking along wearing a heavy overcoat. They decided to see who could get the coat off of him. The North Wind elected to try first. He blew a howling gale around him, but the stronger the wind the more tightly the man drew his coat around himself. Then the Sun said, 'Now it's my turn.' So, he beamed warming rays down upon the man, and soon, of his own choice, the man removed the coat and walked happily in the sunshine. When we surround people with warmth, they will, by their own choice and energy, reveal and remove unnecessary heavy weights they have used as protection.⁵⁶

To be sure, there is a time and a place for firm correction.⁵⁷ But the default position of those who serve Jesus and His people is to be one of teaching and gentleness,

⁵⁶ Gayle Erwin, *The Jesus Style* (Cathedral City: YAHSHUA Publishing, 2011), 154.

⁵⁷ See Jesus' interaction with the money changers in the Temple (John 2:13-16).

not bravado, violence, or a quarrelsome nature. Correction is still called for when needed, but it must be done in a spirit of gentleness with the soul of the offender in mind. The goal is to bring about repentance and reconciliation and to see the one who has been ensnared by the devil freed from that trap, trusting that God is able to deliver such a quarrelsome person, and He may yet do so for His glory.

We must bear this in mind when dealing with messy people prone to missteps who are cantankerous, grumpy, or ugly toward us. We should have no desire to see those who peddle wrong doctrines or deal in the controversial and uncertain crushed in Satan's traps. Our heart is to see them restored by the grace of God and set apart as honorable vessels in His house. After all, some of us were exactly like these people, and the grace and mercy of Christ abounded toward us. He has changed us. And for this, we praise our Lord! The amazing miracle of sanctification has been wrought in our lives even while others counted us as a lost cause! That is the miracle of the cross.

CHAPTER 8 | 2 TIMOTHY 3:1-9

Having spent much time urging Timothy to avoid “foolish ignorant controversies” (2 Tim 2:15, 23), Paul has presented in no uncertain terms the requirement that those who serve the Lord (specifically in a pastoral capacity — but more generally for all believers) must be gentle and not prone to quarreling in their teaching and correction of the saints, with a heart that seeks repentance and reconciliation in the Body.⁵⁸ These characteristics seem all the more needful as we examine the current material in which Paul presents exactly what those servants of the Lord shall certainly face.

V. 1 But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.

After reading these words, we may take a step back and wonder. What?! More difficulty?! After all, the picture that we get of the first-century church presented in the NT is not necessarily a golden age of Christian peace, brotherly love, and universal orthodoxy. It wasn't all roses! The earliest churches contended with much strife from within and without. As a result, much of Paul's writing is dedicated to correcting errors in the church and warning of future suffering.

⁵⁸ Cf. 1 Tim 3:3.

In the very opening verses of this letter, Paul addressed the trepidation that Timothy was experiencing while pastoring in Ephesus and wrote about how mindful he was of Timothy's tears. All was not well in Ephesus (2 Tim 1:4-7).

Even as Timothy was in the midst of pastoring a church that needed correction on doctrine, church life, and basic morality, Paul said to him, "in the last days there will come times of difficulty." How much more difficult could it get?!

Here we must pause and understand exactly what Paul is saying, and what he is not saying. As we will discover, Paul's admonition is not referring to some distant, far-off event that will not be realized in Timothy's life; nor is he basing his understanding of the last days upon some dubious eschatological timeline. Consider what we have recounted thus far: Timothy, Paul, and the first church certainly *lived in* "times of difficulty." What Paul is saying is, "We are in the last days right now; here's the proof, and here's how to live in the times you find yourself in."⁵⁹

How we understand the last times must be anchored in Scripture. We must not allow ourselves to slip into some catatonic spiritual stupor expecting that the last days are some distant reality in which we will not participate. We are participating in them now, just as Paul and Timothy participated in them in their day.

All too often we let our understanding of the last days (eschatology) be molded by fiction, or even our own flawed logic, but at its most fundamental level, the end times include everything after the inauguration of Christ's Kingdom.

⁵⁹ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 429.

An important phrase that Bible scholars have adopted to communicate this idea is, “‘Already/not yet’ [which] is the view that the Kingdom of God has already been inaugurated in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ but will not reach consummation until his return in glory”⁶⁰ (Mark 1:14-15; 1 Cor 15:25).

This was the time that Paul lived in, as did Timothy, as do we. Each day we draw a breath is counted among the last days. As Paul wrote to the Romans,

[Y]ou know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light (Rom 13:11-12).

There are many other such exhortations in the NT for Christians to watch and pray, be sober, and be vigilant while awaiting the return of Christ.

AND there are warnings for those “servants” who say inwardly, “My master is delayed,” and begin to beat their fellow servants (Luke 12:45) and for those who say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4).

The sense we get is that there is a tremendous spiritual distance between those who are actively waiting for the Lord to return and are about the Father’s business versus those who fall into some sort of complacent sluggishness that gives way to unbelief.

⁶⁰ David Nah, “The Already and the Not Yet,” in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

Jesus' teachings on the culmination of human history are certainly confounding at points. Christians have spent vast amounts of energy, abandoning gentleness, to castigate other Christians who do not hold their preferred eschatological view. However, Jesus' teaching on His imminent return is plain concerning at least one point —

Concerning that day or that hour, *no one knows*, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For *you do not know* when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for *you do not know* when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake (Emphasis added, Mark 13:32-37).

In the following verses of our text, Paul gives Timothy some “signs of the times.” Notice two things about what follows. First, nothing here smacks of the fantastic ideations that people holding an unhealthy obsession with the minutiae of the end times often focus on. Second, what Paul presents to Timothy as emblematic of the end times is true of their present (and consequently our own present) in this “Already/Not Yet” Kingdom we are a part of! A simple reading of how Paul describes the last days is sufficient to prove itself. We do not have to dig too deep to understand that what Paul sets forth indicates that the last days are upon us presently! Here is what he says—

Vv. 2-5 For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

Please note that what we read here as descriptive of these last days is also the cause for why these last days are so troublesome. As Paul wrote in v. 1, “Understand that in the last times there will come times of difficulty *because (for)*,” and the list begins.

This is a pretty detailed list of human wretchedness. And if we are being honest, it is a list that we are not altogether exempt from. May the grace of Jesus deliver us from such things.

When we read through these descriptions, we know this is not the Kingdom. This is human sin on full display. Notice that it all begins with “lovers of self.” Marshall and Towner comment, “It is reasonable to assume that the first item in the list sets the tone for what follows...the dominant motif is that people will be self-centred [sic] rather than God-centred [sic].”⁶¹ Paul provides critical instruction for how to deal with such people – avoid them.

Incidentally, note that after Paul presents this list of “vices” that will cause tremendous difficulty for the church in

⁶¹ Marshall and Towner, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 772.

this final period of history, he commands Timothy to avoid such people by writing in the present tense, ending the discussion on whether Paul is referring to some distant future or Timothy's present life. We could paraphrase this as, "You must avoid such people now!"

And we ask ourselves, "Is it that simple? Just avoid them?" Well, as it turns out, there is a little more going on here. In order to avoid these types of people, we would have to leave planet earth altogether.

Paul addresses the Corinthians in a similar fashion. While it is not identical to what we have before us, it certainly bears on our understanding of "avoiding such people."

Here is what he has to say—

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you' (1 Cor 5:9-13).

In his writing to the Corinthians, Paul is clear that those who are to be avoided for their unholiness are people *within the church*. They profess to be Christians but live an entirely different life from that which Christ has called us to, which certainly sounds familiar to us as we have been going through 2 Timothy! This becomes clearer in the following verses.

Vv. 6-7 For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

Notice Paul's use of present tense verbs here as well.⁶² This avoidance is something to be acted upon in the present, in Timothy's personal life and context.

What Paul describes here is something that was actually occurring in their time. It appears that the false teachers that Paul has urged Timothy to correct and to avoid were employing all of their conniving charms and "appearance of godliness," to insert themselves into the lives of a particularly vulnerable group of people (apparently women, most likely widows and the unmarried) in Ephesus and rip them off.

Preeminent Greek NT Scholar William Mounce notes: Having described the sinful Ephesians (vv 1–5), Paul centers on their proselytizing of women. This paragraph clarifies much of the historical picture. The opponents were deceptive, religious charlatans who, like many religious frauds, found disproportional success among the women...The paragraph also helps to explain the emphasis on the Ephesian women and especially the widows throughout the P[astoral] E[pistles] (1 Tim 2:9–15; 3:11; 5:3–16).⁶³

Now, while we may be tempted to take a side path into the discussion of the role of women in ministry, that is not precisely the point here. And, oh man, in seven verses, Paul

⁶² Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 543–544.

⁶³ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 548.

has brought to the forefront two major controversial topics within the modern church – the last days and gender roles.

But let me reiterate: Paul’s point is not to answer all of our burning questions on these topics or to reinforce our own half-formed ideas of how these things work out.⁶⁴ The whole point here is that Paul is warning Timothy about a group of so-called Christians who are out of line, self-obsessed, and hurting people!

They look like Christians and appear godly, all the while denying the power of godliness. They take advantage of others for their own gain and start people on a path of “always learning but never truly knowing.”

These types of people, described as creeping into vulnerable households, are as problematic today as they were then, only now they are piped into millions of households daily! The danger has only been magnified in our age! To drive his point home, Paul appeals to extra-Biblical Jewish tradition.

Vv. 8-9 Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

The names Jannes and Jambres are recorded only here in the Scriptures and are a reference to two of the men in the employ of Pharaoh who tried to discredit the works of God

⁶⁴ Marshall and Towner, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 778.

through Moses. These names are derived from Jewish tradition, and several extra-Biblical documents include them.⁶⁵

The emphasis is on their activity of opposing the truth and having corrupted minds. Paul used these men as an example of what was happening in their time. Jannes and Jambres had a high position; they were even referred to as “wise men” (Ex 7:11). They possessed a certain, dubious form of knowledge that enabled them to give the appearance that they were just as powerful as Moses until they could not match his miracles and finally admitted to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God” (Ex 8:18-19).

While it seems like much of Paul’s writing in these verses is quite gloomy, there is a glimmer of hope. The church’s opponents, false teachers and the like, will not get very far. There is a time when their fraud will be made plain to the household of God. And that is happening even now as the mask of hypocrisy is ripped off to expose their treachery.

We can be sure that there will be, and presently are, times of trouble because of self-centeredness, arrogance, pride, and every other thing that Paul sets forth as troublesome. And yet, Jesus has overcome the world, established His Kingdom, and delivered to us faith, peace, and the ability to discern and persevere.

We can be sure that there will be, and are, wicked men of corrupted minds, disqualified from the faith, who go about feigning godliness in order to satisfy their own wicked desires and hurt God’s people. And yet, they can never truly

⁶⁵ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 550.

reproduce the miracles that God has wrought and that He continues bringing about in the lives of His people. By God's grace and mercy, their deception will only be permitted to go so far.

God's people are the evidence of His power. We are His workmanship (Eph 2:10). The transforming power of the gospel can never be forged by counterfeit saints. Therefore, we trust in God's Word, which tells us that the folly of these wolves in sheep's clothing will be plain to all.

So be alert, Christian! Be discerning! Look for the marks of the gospel. And if need be, avoid those who profane the truth of Christ by their deception. You shall know them by their fruits.

CHAPTER 9 | 2 TIMOTHY 3:10-17

Vv. 10-11 You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me.

Throughout this letter, Paul spends much time describing various characteristics of Timothy's opponents. They are obsessed with controversial arguments, without honor, and prone to irreverent babble and divisiveness.

In fact, in the previous material, Paul explained that the proliferation of these opponents and their self-centeredness leading to all types of wickedness were actually an indicator that Timothy found himself in what Paul called "the last days" (vv. 1-9). But here in vv. 10-11, Paul contrasted Timothy's life against all that he described about these opponents who seized positions inside the church to satisfy their own wicked desires.

Timothy had proven himself faithful by not capitulating to the demands of those who opposed the gospel. Instead, he followed the sound example of his spiritual mentor and pursued the way of Jesus, which notably includes suffering for the gospel's sake.

Being a disciple and a servant of God's people is not merely an exercise in church attendance. By way of

illustration, it has been said, “Just because somebody sits in the garage, it doesn’t make them a car!” So too, sitting in (or rather among) the church does not make them a follower of Jesus.

A life of discipleship proceeds from obeying the leading of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, which invariably leads us to take up our cross and follow Christ. As Jesus taught, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matt 16:24).

While the imperative to take up our cross and follow Him includes an individual call to action, the fullness of Scripture informs us that this is not only a personal endeavor. We are called to be members of one body (John 17:11; Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:17; 1 Cor 12:12; and Eph 4:4), walking together in the unity of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God (Eph 4:1-3). Timothy put this into practice in his own life and pastoral example by following the example that Paul faithfully presented to him and to the church at large.

The term that Paul uses while commending Timothy for *following* his teaching, behavior, purpose, faith, patience, love, and endurance in suffering is more than a mental exercise and affirmation of rightness; it includes “conform[ing] to someone’s belief or practice by paying special attention, [to] follow faithfully.”⁶⁶ There is a vast difference between knowing and affirming what is right in our minds and putting that knowledge into practice by faith and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ with our whole hearts.

⁶⁶ παρακολουθεῖω (*parakoloutheob*), Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 767.

Timothy had taken hold of Paul's example not because Paul replaced Christ, but because in all of Paul's actions and living, he exalted Christ. The aim of his life was to advance Christ's Kingdom for God's glory.

The cry of Jesus followers, who have taken up their cross to follow wherever Christ may lead, is, "Follow me, as I follow Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). This call has produced an unending line of disciples and faithfulness since the first church, and it is our call today.

However...the way is marked with suffering and persecution. Paul experienced this. Timothy experienced this. Every last Apostle of the first century experienced this. Church tradition holds that all but the Apostle John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, died in the teeth of their persecutions.⁶⁷

Bringing the conversation back to Paul, he notes here that so far, Christ had delivered him from all of his persecutions (Acts 13-14). But there would come a day when Paul would give his life for the gospel. Paul writes in this very same letter: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come" (2 Tim 4:6). He also writes in Philippians,

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Phil 1:20-21).

⁶⁷ It is traditionally believed that the Apostle John was boiled alive in oil but survived and was also banished to the Island of Patmos but survived. He was eventually recalled from his banishment and lived out his days in Ephesus.

Please understand that this is not fatalism. Paul is not feeling sorry for himself or pouting. His conviction is a determination to see his work for Christ through to the end, knowing that it is for God's glory and the reconciliation of sinners to a holy God! This matters! The gospel matters enough to die for, and those who follow Christ must prepare themselves for the promise of suffering.

Remember Christ's words,

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me (John 15:18-21).

Gird yourself, Christian. Pray for strength and the grace of the Lord to bear up under hardship!

Vv. 12-13 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Even while commending Timothy for his faithfulness, Paul asserts here that the way of faithfulness is marked with suffering. Count on it! The idea that those who oppose the

gospel⁶⁸, their harassments, criticisms, and persecutions will cease over time as we “christianize” the globe is certainly an attractive idea, but it is not a Biblical one. In fact, Paul presents quite the opposite idea. Evil people and impostors will grow from bad to worse, and their influence will be felt as they continue to deceive others, even as they themselves are deceived.

The promise of persecution that Paul offered here is meant to strengthen Timothy’s resolve and to remind him that suffering for the gospel’s sake is part of following Jesus. Timothy continued to walk in the way of Jesus and shepherd God’s people in the midst of opponents and false teachers. Like Timothy, we ought not to be shocked by the prospect of suffering for Jesus.

To borrow from Peter,

Beloved, *do not be surprised* at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you (1 Pet 4:12-14, emphasis added).

Now, in our localized sphere of Christianity and in much of the Western world, our persecutions do not hold a candle to the suffering of Christians in the Middle East, China, India, and other places that violently oppose the gospel. Nevertheless, Peter’s words are still true, and the pastor must

⁶⁸ Bear in mind that the context indicates that Timothy was suffering a specific form of opposition and harassment from within the church.

prepare God's people to bear up under whatever form of persecution they may face.

The persecution we experience is often surface-level harassment, criticism from family, or even criticism from other Christians who have not yet learned to love the whole Body of Christ. That kind of persecution is sometimes scoffed at and demeaned from the pulpit by those who are trying to remind believers just how good we have it in a generally Christianized society (although it is doubtful anybody would characterize our society as such).

Still we must admit that the criticism we face, marginal as it may be compared to violent persecution, still hurts. We feel misunderstood, mischaracterized, wrongly labeled, and shunned because of our faith. My encouragement to you is: don't give up, but rather, as you experience these things for Jesus' name's sake, take a moment, breathe, and count yourself as blessed, remembering that the Spirit of God rests upon you, and your suffering for Christ's sake is a mark of godliness. Rejoice that you have been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for Jesus' name (Acts 5:41).

Vv. 14-15 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Simply put, Paul tells Timothy, “Don’t give up, keep going, remember where you came from and where you are going.”

You see, Timothy was raised in a believing home. God’s Word, the Scriptures, had been fed to him since his childhood by his mother and his grandmother (2 Tim 1:5).⁶⁹ That influence in the home produced significant fruit in Timothy’s life and the life of the first-century church.

The Holy Scriptures (used here to refer expressly to the Old Testament, but certainly referring prophetically to the completed canon) are critically important to our faith. We believe that the Holy Scriptures are the final authority in all matters of faith and practice and they are the only thing that can form a right faith within us in conjunction with the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. No motivational speech, no appeal to extra-Biblical moral teaching can produce faith in Christ. It must be Scripture alone.

Paul says here that knowing the Scriptures produces wisdom in the one acquainted with them, with the ultimate goal of bringing about faith in Christ. The whole point of the Bible is to bear witness of Christ, and to call men and women to repentance and faith in Christ so that we may be reconciled to God! God’s Word alone is divinely appointed to be transformative, to be our bedrock of truth, and to deliver the words of eternal life (John 6:88) to those who are dead in their trespasses and sins apart from them! (Eph 2:1)

⁶⁹ George Knight remarks, “The Mishnah [a collection of Jewish rabbinic teaching]...gives five years of age as the time that a Jewish child is fit for scripture.” Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 443.

Remember Jesus' words to the Scribes and Pharisees, a group of people who were by any measure immersed in the Scriptures: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39).

Our aim in life, to borrow from Paul, is to present the whole counsel of God in such a way that people can hear God's truth about Christ and be changed by it so that they might hear the invitation to discipleship and, having counted the cost, take up their cross and follow in the way of Christ.

To undergird his assertions on the divine nature of the Scriptures, Paul offers the following instruction, and it is this instruction that commands us ever more forcefully to cling to the sure word of God in all matters of faith, doctrine, and living.

Vv. 16-17 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Before we examine Paul's teaching on the inspiration of the Scriptures, we must first acknowledge that it is true that this book we possess *is* a human book; it was authored by humans. Some Christians find this unsettling. Our opponents from within and without will assail this truth in an attempt to subvert the authority of Scripture and evade its teachings. Do not fret! Embrace the humanity of the Book! God chose in

His sovereignty to use human authors to communicate His message perfectly.

Let us also understand that inasmuch as this is a human book, it is a *supernatural book* containing God's revelation of Himself to humanity, "as well as his people's varied responses to his person and his acts in history."⁷⁰ Klein, et al. put it this way,

Certainly human writers composed the Scriptures in the midst of their own cultures and circumstances... Yet, somehow, God superintended their writing so that what they wrote comprised his message precisely.⁷¹

Peter gives us some sense of how this transpired when he writes,

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. *For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit* (2 Pet 1:19-21, emphasis added).

This is what Paul expresses as he writes that all Scripture is *God-breathed*. Some translations of the Bible read "inspired" instead of "God-breathed" or "breathed out by God," but the language here is really important.

⁷⁰ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*, 213.

⁷¹ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*, 213.

In Biblical scholarship the term that Paul employs here to describe the whole of Scripture as being “God-breathed” is known as a *hapax legomenon* (the short form is *hapax*). This label (*hapax*) refers to a word or phrase used only once throughout the Bible (or some other subdivision of Biblical literature).

Some Bible scholars see Paul’s special use of this term, “God-breathed,” as a call back to God’s divine utterance and creative work in Genesis chapter 2.⁷² They suggest that in some sense Paul is connecting the dots between God’s creative work through His Word at the beginning of time and His creative work through His Word to inspire the Holy Scriptures. The book we possess is extraordinary, divine, God-breathed, and has been preserved by God Himself throughout the ages for His people.

The Scriptures reveal God’s heart, and we see here in Paul’s writing that God’s heart for His people is that they would be equipped for every good work *by his word!* That good work includes teaching, correction, and pursuing a life of righteousness in Christ!

How can anybody claim to represent God to others, proclaim unassailable truth, issue the call of Christ to take up our cross, and issue the challenge to “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” without being firmly anchored in God’s revelation of Himself – the Bible? How can anybody offer correction in the right spirit and the right heart with the right focus on Christ without being anchored in the Scriptures? How can

⁷² Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*, 212.

anybody be properly trained in righteousness without being anchored in the Scriptures?

Only by God's sure Word can we approach these things in the right spirit. When we diverge from God's Word our teaching comes off as hollow; our correction comes off as vindictive; our training in righteousness becomes legalistic; and even our good works come off as performative or, worse, manipulative.

But...in God's Holy Word, we come face to face with Christ as the Scriptures bear witness of Him. In that place, we can follow Him and be conformed to His likeness; we can labor for His glory, knowing the certainty of what we have received, our lives bearing witness to the truth.

As Paul encourages Timothy in these verses, may we also continue in what we have learned and put our faith in. Let us resist the persistent call to plunge headlong into the ever-evolving sensibilities of the cultural zeitgeist, holding fast to the sure Word of God as once and for all delivered to us. Do not turn to the left or the right.

CHAPTER 10 | 2 TIMOTHY 4:1-8

At the conclusion of chapter three, Paul explained the divine nature of the Scriptures. They are God-breathed and uniquely profitable in the spiritual formation of believers (2 Tim 3:16-17). Having done so, he now issues Timothy a solemn charge to keep. However, before we proceed to an examination of this solemn charge, let us take a moment to consider the centrality of God's Word as presented by Paul. It is crucial for us to understand this before we can begin to handle the charge laid upon Timothy's shoulders.

The Scriptures are uniquely set apart by God, proceeding from God (being God-breathed), for the people of God to do the work of God. Scripture alone bears these holy marks. Certainly, there are other works that are beneficial to us (some more than others). God has, in fact, gifted people with intellect, artistry, creativity, understanding, and the ability to communicate preternaturally. But God's Word alone stands apart as supernatural, divine.

Sometimes we Christians take this truth for granted. We live in an age where access to the Scriptures, at least in our Western context, is presumed. Any and every translation imaginable is available at our fingertips. The reason why many Christians of our age are not biblically literate is not necessarily a matter of access, but more so because of a lack of desire and spiritual discipline. Many Christians keep a healthy inventory of Bibles on hand to serve as some sort of

quasi-new-age talisman rather than actually cracking the thing open and being grasped by the truths therein.

However, we must acknowledge that our unprecedented access to the Bible has not always been the norm. And the fact that we do have unconstrained access to the Bible and yet choose to consume other things to fill our hearts and minds speaks to our modern culture of learned apathy.

By way of example, in the time of Martin Luther, arguably the father of the Protestant Reformation, those who desired to pursue a life of ministry essentially had one option – join a monastery, pursue theological studies, and seek to serve under the banner of the Roman Catholic Church. All others were scorned, or worse, branded heretics and executed publicly.

Eric Metaxas writes in his biography on the life of Martin Luther that when a person entered monastic life, they were given access to a Bible during their novitiate (their introductory phase to the ministry). Sadly, “once a novice actually became a monk, he was no longer allowed to keep his Bible. At that point, he must limit himself to only reading scholarly books.” In addition, they may have had access to a Bible only if they chose to visit the monastery’s library.⁷³

All too often, this centuries-old practice is mirrored in contemporary seminaries and church cultures. But it was the Bible, God’s Word breathed out by Him, that brought about the spiritual awakening of the Reformers (and all “back to the Bible” movements) and birthed one of the foundational

⁷³ Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2017), 53.

tenets of modern Christianity – Sola Scriptura; Scripture Alone.

And *that* is the focus of Paul's charge to Timothy: keep the main thing (the Word), the main thing.

Vv. 1-2 I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his Kingdom: 2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Paul's charge to Timothy is firmly anchored in the authority and omnipresence of God the Father in unity with God the Son, Jesus Christ. These words are meant to convey the weight, the gravity, of this command to maintain the centrality of Scripture in Timothy's ministry. This charge ought to be revisited by every pastor and Bible teacher each time they prepare themselves to take the pulpit.

Sermonizing on moral platitudes or culture wars will not be sufficient, even if they are cloaked in Biblical-sounding language. Those messages may scratch a temporary itch (as we will see), but departing from God's Word is a danger to be avoided at all costs.

When Paul penned this letter to Timothy, he understood that God was present with him in that moment of authorship. When Timothy read this letter, he was to understand that God was present with him in that moment of reading as well. The great Judge of all creation is present in each moment, and that ought to bear on the work of the

pastor and on anyone who sets their hand to the plow in Jesus' name.

If, in fact, our work is in Jesus's name, then we ought to take heed to how we represent Him to others and to His church. And we are to remain fixed upon His divine Word which reveals His person, work, and heart.

This command is for all times and all places – in season and out of season. There is no season when we are allowed to “pick something else” to talk about. It must be God's Word.⁷⁴ Sticking to the truths of the Bible provides the preacher of the Word the ability to offer correction and encouragement in the right spirit, and allows the hearer of the Word to be formed into the image of Christ by the helping ministry of the Holy Spirit.

All of the clever, extra-Biblical preaching meant to provoke an emotional response or a call to action based on personal effort and willpower has been shown to produce only momentary change; history has demonstrated this over and over again. The hottest, newest, sleekest methods of discipleship and spiritual formation divorced from God's Word can only ever be a flash in the pan. And yet we continue to retool and reinvent these same failing experiments over and over again. It is God's Word preached and received that brings about lasting change and eternal life.

⁷⁴ The Greek term translated as “the word,” ὁ λόγος (*ho logos*), is theologically significant in the NT, referring variously to the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1), to the Scriptures here in v.2, and to speech elsewhere. In v.2 this usage (singular, accusative) the term serves as the direct object — the thing that Timothy is to apply in his ministry.

As Mark Dever writes, “God’s Word has always created God’s people.”⁷⁵ We could expound upon this thought by recalling God’s creative work in Genesis, His covenants, the establishment of the Law at Sinai, the prophets of Israel, the Word incarnate in Christ, the Apostolic instruction, and so forth.

So, we affirm again; it must be God’s Word that we preach, that we profess, that we look to as authoritative and true. And in doing so, we must also commit to patience in our work.

Remember,

[T]he word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12).

As we wield God’s Word, we must do so in the patience of Christ, not haphazardly risking the destruction of others at our own untrained hands – lopping off a head here and an arm there. Rather, we present God’s Word in all patience, trusting that God’s Word will accomplish what He purposes. It will not return empty (Isa 55:11).

But why is Paul so forceful in commanding Timothy to declare God’s Word in patience and teaching, allowing it to have its correcting and encouraging work in the lives of the hearer? He gives the answer in the next few verses.

Vv. 3-4 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will

⁷⁵ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013, ebook), n.p.

accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

The imperatives issued to Timothy regarding preaching the Word and the solemn language invoking the presence, authority, and Kingdom of God are exactly because people will not “toler[ate], bear with, [nor] put up with”⁷⁶ sound Biblical teaching. While Paul uses future tense language to indicate a season that is coming, we discussed in the previous material that he understood this as occurring in his own time as well (cf. 2 Tim 3:1-9).

An enduring part of Paul’s Apostolic ministry was correcting false teachers, fighting against heresy, and defending right belief; a fight he charged Timothy to continue throughout this letter. Paul understood that this trend would continue to grow and that the leaders of this type of unhealthy teaching, whom Paul characterized as evil impostors, would go from bad to worse (3:13).

Why? Why do people allow such things? Why do they turn from sound teaching to that which is unhealthy, unbiblical, and dangerous? The answer is found here in the text; they have an itch they desire to scratch. That itch includes a desire to affirm their passions, and the only teachers that they will listen to, the only people they will allow to stand before them, are those who will preach a message that scratches that itch.

⁷⁶ ἀνέχω (*anekoh*), “[T]o regard w[ith] tolerance, endure, bear with, put up with.” Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 78.

We also see here that they will accumulate these types of teachers in mass. The KJV reads, “heap up,” and the NASB reads, “gather around them a great number” of these fraudulent, pliable, affirming pastors and teachers to tell them exactly what they want to hear.

So not only will there be false teachers who are culpable for this sickness invading the church, but the church itself, the congregation, the hearers will share in that sin by curating a church culture that shuns the pure proclamation of God’s Word in exchange for falsehoods and myths. We could give any number of examples of what this looks like in our time. And even as we read these words, we can see that we are surrounded by the very thing Paul warned against.

All manner of one-time orthodox, Bible-centered churches and denominations are falling by the wayside and are now filled with people (and pastors!) who have abandoned the teaching of God’s Word for humanistic messages, prophetic fantasy, and extra-Biblical myths and fairytales. It is truly heartbreaking.

V. 5 As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

As Timothy was staring this reality in the face at Ephesus,⁷⁷ his beloved mentor and spiritual father instructed him in the way of Jesus. Timothy was not to participate in

⁷⁷ Cf. Acts 20:17-31.

nor endorse these actions, and neither should we.

Nevertheless, the temptation is always present.

Some people, even those who claim the name Christian for themselves, consider the simple, systematic, consecutive exposition of Scripture as outdated, not flashy enough, or too cumbersome. In light of all that, Timothy is to stand his ground, keeping a clear head, a stout heart, and the gospel on his lips as he fulfills the task at hand, which critically includes evangelism.

Some people who feel sincerely, deeply called to ministry have uttered the confounding phrase, “I’m not called to be an evangelist.” Nothing could be further from the truth. All those who are called to the ministry of the Book are called to evangelism. If we truly believe this is God’s inspired Word, we must also acknowledge that we do not get to pick and choose what parts of it we want to teach. In the same way, we do not get to pick and choose which commands we want to obey!

We have the Great Commission and the example and writings of the Apostles that clearly tell us we have a duty to go out into all the world, make disciples, teach them obedience to all of Christ’s teachings, and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19-20). It is this ministry of evangelism that we are to fulfill, and that Timothy was commanded to fulfill, even in the face of opposition, false teachers, and false congregations.

If people are constantly indoctrinated with a message of self-affirmation, humanism, secularism, culture wars, and mythology, they do not need a competing message that is

everything they are being taught wrapped in Christian clothes. What they need is a better message, the good message – the gospel. They need to be brought back to the center. It is by the mercy and grace of God that He has so ordained in his church “Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers” for this work (Eph 4:11).

We find ourselves in a unique societal context where evangelists are needed not only to declare the gospel to unreached people groups across the globe (that is certainly a need and part of the Great Commission) but also where vast swaths of those who are Christian-aligned (morally, politically, or otherwise) have missed the gospel altogether!

There are masses of people with a nominal faith who need to be reintroduced to the Good News! Evangelists are desperately needed for this work, and God has issued the charge to those who find themselves shepherding His people to get on with it!

The questions we are asking in our evangelistic endeavors must change from “Do you believe in God?” or “Where do you go to church?” to a proclamation of the gospel – that Jesus Christ bore God’s wrath for our sakes, conquered sin and death, and rose from the grave in a demonstration of His authority over all things. As a result, he imputes His righteousness to those who believe by faith for the sole purpose of reconciling humans to God. Because of His great love for His creation, He has done so solely based upon His grace and His own initiative.

This is the message that ought to be on our lips. Our evangelistic efforts are not intended to establish a political

dynamo that will last for ages in the stewardship of men. Christ alone is ruling and reigning and shall rule and reign forever.

Furthermore we see another reminder of suffering. This informs us that evangelism is not for the express purpose of making Christian lives more comfortable. Timothy and all the NT saints are promised suffering and encouraged to endure it. The promise of the gospel is eternal life, a Kingdom inaugurated and yet to come, to call wayward believers back to the cross and from there to bear fruits of righteousness in our lives for the glory of God.

Vv. 6-8 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Paul now writes upon his approaching departure from this world. He sees quite clearly that his time of ministry on this earth is drawing to a close. He will soon die. What a challenging prospect! Just as he began this portion of the letter appealing to the Great Judge of all creation, Jesus Christ, he now returns to the prospect of his own imminent meeting with the Great Judge in eternity.

This perhaps prompts the question — what would you say to someone you loved if you knew your time was drawing to

a close and you would soon stand before Jesus Christ? This can be a healthy mental exercise for believers and unbelievers alike. Carefully considering how we answer may illuminate what we hold most dear in this life.

Many people will find themselves at the end of their lives wishing they had done something different, something more. Many Christians will find themselves wishing they had plowed straighter, given more, evangelized louder, or been more bold, declaring the gospel with those they love. But notice, there is no hint of that in Paul's reflection upon his own life as he labored for the gospel. He has done what he could, which was his reasonable act of service (Rom 12:1, NKJV). He fulfilled his ministry, so Paul's last words to Timothy are to do the same (4:5).

Paul sets himself forth as an example to follow. In his writings, there is no sense of fear or dread for Christians meeting the Judge of all creation in eternity. On the contrary, Paul looks forward to the day when he shall meet Christ face to face, knowing that he gave everything he had in Christ's service. He looks forward to finishing well.

Contrary to those who heap up teachers to affirm their passions here on Earth, Paul has diligently followed Christ, fought the good fight with all tenacity, endured suffering, and looked forward to finding his work and life affirmed by Christ in eternity.

What will this look like or rather sound like? Jesus tells us in Matt 25:34,

Then the King will say to those on his right [the position of favor], 'Come, you who are blessed by my

Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' (comments added for clarity).

There is a crown waiting for those who are poured out for Jesus' sake, those who have fought the good fight and have kept the faith.⁷⁸ There is an eternal Kingdom waiting, and it is this Kingdom we proclaim. It is this Kingdom that we advance by the Spirit of God, and the Word of God, for the glory of God. And it is this Kingdom that we declare to those outside so that they might enter into it by the blood of Christ. Fight the good fight, keep running, do not lose heart!

⁷⁸ Cf. Rev 4:10.

CHAPTER 11 | 2 TIMOTHY 4:9-22

For the majority of 2 Timothy, Paul has labored diligently to encourage Timothy to remain anchored in the certainty of the gospel, to refute heresy where heresy abounds (and is expected to increase), to endure suffering in a world where suffering is common, and to “guard the good deposit” entrusted to him as a shepherd of the Lord’s flock (2 Tim 1:14).

The letter itself is a remarkable testament to Paul’s tenacity in the face of opposition and commitment to the gospel, even to the very end of his life. While imprisoned in Rome, Paul did not fade into obscurity or relent in his encouragement and instruction to the churches that they desperately needed to form a Christ-centered, scripturally based faith.

When circumstances conspire against us, some Christians believe that we are not in the proper position to be of any real use in the Kingdom. Not so! Paul was imprisoned, his personal agency limited, his resources severely constrained, knocking on death’s door, and yet he was used mightily by God through his writing.

As we finish this letter, so rich with pastoral instruction, we come upon a very intimate portion of Scripture that gives us some insight into Paul’s personal life as he approached his imminent execution in Rome at the hands of Caesar Nero.

These final words also reveal to us the tender heart that the Apostle Paul had for God’s people *in spite* of his

circumstances. There is no indication of self-obsession or despair, but rather an open heart and faithful instruction in God's Word to Timothy (a man with a tall task before him), whom he loved deeply.

What follows are very human words from a man who is considered a giant of the faith. Paul is so well-known for his Spirit-inspired theology, skillful handling of Scripture, and zeal to defend the faith against the insidious corrosion of wrong doctrine already seeping into the early church. And here we see Paul, the man.

These final words of Paul are particularly dear to me. I credit them with bringing me to faith in Christ. And what an unlikely passage to bring someone to faith! Shouldn't somebody be brought to faith through one of the many theologically profound passages we all know and love?

Perhaps—

John 1:1 – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

John 14:6 – “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

Eph 2:8-9 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Rom 1:16-17 – “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.””

All these are rich with theological truth; they are *soul winners*. Volumes have been written about them and their transformative power, and rightly so. But in my case, by the grace of God and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, Christ met me here in these verses and opened my eyes to the reality of the Bible.

What I mean is this: Having grown up in the US, rooted in a generally Judeo-Christian ethic, I knew about the Bible. I had heard about the golden rule and the Ten Commandments. But the Bible had been presented in such a piecemeal way that my perception was that this book was composed of various moral platitudes, good life lessons, and stories about the miraculous that pushed the bounds of the imagination. I was once firmly booted out of Roman Catholic Sunday school for having too much of a laugh about the account of Jesus’ disciples finding money in a fish’s mouth in Matt 17:24-27.

As it happened, I found myself reading, without any agenda or purpose, this letter in a paperback Bible during my

teenage years. And in these verses, God presented to me the bones and viscera of Scripture. He showed me the humanity of it all. He showed me in plain language that part and parcel of the grand theological truths conveyed to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit *are* real people.

In these verses, God showed me that this book was true by confronting me with the names of long-departed saints and apostates. In reading these names, these personal requests, and inferring the particulars of Paul's imprisonment and interpersonal relationships from the text, a light bulb turned on in my head and, more importantly, in my heart.

These were not simply moral platitudes dreamed up by fictitious characters; this is a real account of actual events written by *actual* people who gave their lives for the truth. And through the cross, God has reconciled to himself those who, by faith, believe in Christ. These people lived, served, suffered, and even died for the gospel. And sadly, some fell away. That truth changed my life; the names in these verses shouted out to me from across the ages that this is real. And...if this were real, then the implications of what I held in my hands demanded a response, and the only reasonable response would be to take it seriously, know it, be grasped by it, and live by it in pursuit of God's heart.

Vv. 9-12 Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring

**him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.
Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus.**

In vv. 9-12, we are presented with a few statements that tell us a few things about Paul's relationships and how they developed over time. We also learn a bit about faithfulness, abandonment, and reconciliation.

Upon first reading, some of these names are familiar to us, while we may not be as familiar with others. Easily recognizable to us are Titus, the recipient of the letter bearing his name; Luke, who authored the gospel of the same name and Acts; and Mark, author of the Gospel of Mark. Perhaps not as easy to place for most Christians are Demas, Crescens, and Tychicus (though Tychicus is mentioned several times in the NT: Acts 20:4; Eph 6:21; Col 4:7; Tit 3:12).

While Paul is left in the sole company of Luke, whom he had spent some time traveling with during his ministry, we must be careful to note that the only person who explicitly abandoned Paul was this man Demas.⁷⁹ Demas is mentioned in passing in Col 4:14 and Philemon v. 24, and there is no indication of his instability. However, here we see a tragic tale that besets many a one-time fervent saint...abandoning the Kingdom in pursuit of the world. Demas' affections were wrapped up in the world to such an extent that it caused him to abandon a loved one, Paul, and by implication, his own

⁷⁹ "The construction of the phrase with these two others [Crescens and Titus], consisting of the person's name with the prepositional phrase, implies only this latter verb, not the earlier statement about desertion." Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 465.

ministry. The other men, it is believed, continued in ministry.⁸⁰

Even that thought, continuing in ministry, may challenge our hearts a bit if we are honest. Crescens and Titus loved Paul and had been discipled by him, but now they must make the difficult decision on how they will live out the remainder of their own lives. Will they continue to advance the Kingdom, or be sidelined by suffering? And as is common, there are various responses (as we see in the text). Some abandoned the work altogether, some continued faithfully, and, as in the case of Mark, some came to reconciliation regarding past wrongs.

I cannot emphasize enough that the practical application for our own lives is that we must always keep our eyes and hearts fixed on the person and work of Christ, and not on any one personality, no matter how significantly they have influenced us. If our teachers, mentors, and beloved pastors are doing their duty unto Christ, they will undoubtedly be pointing us to Him as Paul did.

Now, concerning Mark, remember that he did not have the best reputation early in his ministry. As a matter of fact, the dubious involvement of Mark in Paul's own early ministry with Barnabas became a point of sharp contention because "Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work" (Acts 15:38). This caused Barnabas and Paul to part ways, and we could reasonably assume that the event also caused significant emotional turmoil for all parties involved.

⁸⁰ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 588-591.

Modern Christians have come up with a clever phrase to describe this parting as “Divine division,” which helps us re-center ourselves on the sovereignty of God in building His church as He sees fit.

Both Barnabas and Paul loved the Lord (and so did Mark). Neither party was in sin or peddling heresy, yet they found themselves at a crossroads over Mark’s desertion that became quite contentious. We must admit though that the polished phrase “Divine Division” does not eliminate the conflict or the feelings of hurt proceeding from such a desertion.

But here, toward the end of Paul’s ministry, we see something wonderful happened between Paul and Mark. Apparently, they have reconciled. Paul now views Mark as helpful, beneficial, and useful;⁸¹ not as that one-time flaky immature saint who deserted them on the mission field. That is grace! That is forgiveness! That is love! That is being in one accord with the Holy Spirit and anchored in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And certainly, we would agree with Paul that we have benefited tremendously from the ministry of Mark as we have his gospel in our Bibles!⁸²

Now, as Paul is beginning to lose companions for one reason or another, he requests Timothy’s presence (and Mark’s) exactly because the others have gone on to do other things. Timothy and Paul had a powerful relationship, and it makes sense that he would like to see his young apprentice

⁸¹ εὐχρηστος, (*eukreistos*) Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 417.

⁸² Some scholars believe that Mark’s gospel is the earliest of all the gospel accounts.

face to face to gain some comfort and to encourage one another's hearts (cf. Rom 1:11-12).

V. 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.

Verse 13 is such a personal note. We are almost tempted to see it as mundane, but we must resist that temptation! All of God's Word is inspired by Him and useful for equipping the saints for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

We could spend much time speculating about these books and parchments that Paul has requested – perhaps the Scriptures, perhaps other writings, perhaps materials to write on. Multiple theories have been proposed.⁸³ Along with these, he also requested Timothy to bring his cloak, which would have been a required garment as Paul was preparing for winter (cf. v. 21).

So we see Paul the man deriving some form of basic comfort from a warm cloak and some reading materials, likely the Scriptures. We see that he had a close enough relationship with Timothy that asking him to care for these matters was not too much of a stretch or inconvenience. Reasonably we expect that Timothy cared enough to make sure he took care of these matters for his beloved spiritual father.

⁸³ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 467.

Vv. 14-15 Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.

As Timothy continued preparing for this trip and carrying out all of the pastoral instructions given in this letter, Paul reminded him to pay special attention to a particularly dangerous opponent of their work, a man named Alexander, who had dished out much trauma (Acts 19:33). The Greek term rendered here as “harm” actually has another meaning that would also be appropriate in the context – evil.⁸⁴

There will always be people who oppose the work of the gospel and who seek to inflict harm and evil on God’s people. We must always beware of these people even as Jesus taught the disciples, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16).

Vv. 16-18 At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly Kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

⁸⁴ *κακός*, Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 501.

Paul was faced with defending himself in the legal system of ancient Rome, and his personal support system failed him. People who loved him deserted him and left him to fend for himself. This is quite disturbing, and while Paul experienced this firsthand, we like to think we are made of stronger stuff than those who abandoned him in his moment of need. Sometimes we, like Peter, overestimate our own convictions and moral courage.

You remember Peter's story:

Then Jesus said to them, 'All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.' Peter answered and said to Him, 'Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble.' Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.' Peter said to Him, 'Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!' *And so said all the disciples* (Matt 26:31-35 NKJV, emphasis added).

Though we may resolve in our hearts to stand firm and make assertions of our faithfulness, we can never know until the time comes. We must pray for the grace of the Lord Jesus to cause us to stand firm.

Regarding those who deserted Paul, Marshall writes,

The strong expression [written by Paul] ... implies fault, whether lack of courage or lack of concern for Paul. Nevertheless, he regards the failure as forgivable, and therefore instead of the statement that God will render to them accordingly [as in the case with Alexander] (v. 14), there is a prayer that they will be forgiven.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Marshall and Towner, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 823.

In this, we see Paul embody the heart of Christ, praying for their forgiveness and demonstrating his deep understanding of the human condition that we are fickle, movable, not as stalwart as we judge ourselves, and in need of grace and forgiveness (cf. Luke 23:34).

We are also reminded, by way of great contrast, of Christ's faithfulness to His people. While everybody else deserted Paul, Christ did not. He was with Paul, strengthening and enabling him to preach the gospel faithfully, even in his imprisonment, abandonment, and in the face of opposition and hostility. Why? So that the gospel might go forth into that mass of unsaved people and that some might come to faith!

Thus, it is that Paul understands that any relief he has experienced (being delivered from the lion's mouth!) is exactly because of Christ's faithfulness.⁸⁶ *And...* he is convinced that Christ shall deliver him not only in a temporary localized sense but in an eternal sense. Passing into eternity, though accompanied by suffering, is the ultimate delivery from evil, and Christ shall deliver all who are His safely.

This truth is so significant to Paul that he is moved to record the praise of his heart for the Lord Jesus – a fruitful practice for all of us.

⁸⁶ There is some scholarly debate on whether or not Paul's description of "the lion's mouth" is literal, referring to the gladiatorial games where often Christians were killed by wild animals; or metaphorical referring to a temporary stay of execution at the hands of the Roman Emperor. Marshall and Towner, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 825.

Vv. 19-22 Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus remained at Corinth, and I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus. Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.

As Paul ends verse 18 with a final flourish of doxology and a closing “Amen,” he now concludes with final parting remarks of greetings and blessing.

The saints of the first church were eager to send their greetings to other Christians. This is right and good. Take time to reach out and encourage other believers no matter how far away they are! And perhaps the best words to do this with are precisely the words Paul uses here: “The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.”

There are certainly times in our lives when the grind of life, ministry, jobs, and relationships wear on us. We know perfectly well that Christ is faithful. We are all too familiar with these writings and the countless reminders of Christ’s faithfulness presented to us throughout the Bible, but for some reason, in our hurried lives, sometimes it all seems so stale. And then, in a moment of need or spiritual exhaustion, a dearly loved brother or sister reaches out to us and reminds us – the Lord is with you, and I am praying that you will be reminded of this. Grace is yours in the name of Jesus Christ, and you are dearly loved and cared for. This is my prayer for you, wherever you are, that you would be mindful of the

Lord's presence in your life and that the grace of the Lord Jesus would be with you always. Amen.

PART II

TITUS

CHAPTER 1 | TITUS 1:1-5

The book of Titus is one of three Pauline letters (along with 1 & 2 Timothy) collectively referred to as the Pastoral Epistles. These three books are characterized by a decidedly pastoral tone as they contain instructions regarding the qualifications of pastors (elders/overseers) and deacons, biblical church government, orthodox teaching, church life, and godliness in the lives of those who make up the church through faith in Christ.⁸⁷

While the book of Titus is presented in our Bibles as the third of the Pastoral Epistles, it is the second chronologically.⁸⁸ It is believed that Paul wrote this letter from Corinth following his first Roman imprisonment around the year 67 A.D., about the time of the authorship of 1 Timothy.⁸⁹ The recipient of this letter, as we will come to see, is a man named Titus, whom Paul had converted, labored

⁸⁷ For a fuller examination of church government, see Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 904-944.

⁸⁸ With a few exceptions (the Gospels, Acts) the books in our NT canon of Scripture are arranged by size (largest to smallest) within type (Pauline, General, etc.) and not chronology.

⁸⁹ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 430.

with, and subsequently sent to the island of Crete⁹⁰ so that he might correct doctrinal errors, instruct the church on godly living that accords with faith, and ensure the establishment (or perhaps re-establishment) of healthy church leadership.

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown remark on the purpose for writing this letter: “Corrupt elements soon showed themselves in the Cretan Church . . . Judaism, false pretensions to science, and practical ungodliness.”⁹¹ And so, even as we often lament the state of the modern church, we see that the early church contended with many of the same issues that we deal with today.

In remembrance of this, we thank God for preserving the Holy Scriptures for us so that we might know how to conduct ourselves presently as His holy church (cf. 1 Tim 3:15) when faced with these same issues. God has given us a way to know right from wrong, good from evil, and He has done so through His Word.

The temptation in our age when it comes to church development and spiritual formation is to look for the “easy way out” by scouring the internet for a step-by-step guide to solve our woes. Readily available at our fingertips are mountains of reading material, sometimes only tangentially

⁹⁰ The island of Crete has a rich history. Archaeological evidence has revealed that a highly sophisticated Minoan society existed there in the 3rd millennium BC, about 1500 years before the Exodus. In Greek mythology, Crete was the birthplace of Zeus. Today Crete is part of the nation of Greece. Mark S. Krause, “Crete,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), np.

⁹¹ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory*, 430.

related to Scripture, promising: “10 Steps to Revive Your Church” or “3 Simple Ways to Grow Your Church.”

The reality is that we have God’s Word, which serves as the final authority in all of these matters. We need it and must rely on it. Moreover, if we hope to please God, then we must discard our feeble attempts at worldly success and allow God to build His church by His Spirit and His Word (Acts 2:47; Gal 3:3). Bearing these things in mind, let us examine Paul’s letter to Titus.

V. 1 Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect⁹² and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness,⁹³

In classic Pauline style, the book opens with an introduction of the author himself – the Apostle Paul, also called Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:11). In each letter Paul wrote, he intentionally, and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, introduced himself, not based on his own expertise, training,

⁹² Towner notes, “‘God’s elect’ (Rom 8:33; Col 3:12) for the people of God is an OT concept that was readily adapted to the church’s situation. Paul implies that those who have come to faith through his apostolate are therefore God’s people, ‘chosen’ by him, and continuous with the OT community of faith. As in the case of 2 Tim 2:10, where Paul describes the purpose of his suffering, here ‘the elect’ is not a futuristic reference to all who will come to faith, but rather, corresponding to biblical usage, a reference to those who have already done so.” Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 667.

⁹³ All Scripture references are from the ESV.

education, or experience, but in the personhood and work of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, when Paul did lay out his own personal accomplishments (he wasn't prone to bouts of false humility), covenant heritage, and religious zeal, he pointedly wrote, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil 3:7).

These seemingly plain opening verses, coupled with what we know about Paul himself, present to us an example to follow. By way of practical application, this humility ought to bear out in the lives of all who serve God's people. All pastors and all those who put their hand to the plow for Jesus' sake ought to count their own credentials and accomplishments as loss for the sake of Christ.

Christ alone calls and qualifies us for the pastoral office; no amount of experience, family heritage, or biblical training will suffice. It is Christ we desire to know and be known by. It is Christ whom we present as the head of the church – not ourselves. We are, as Paul declares here... simply servants.

Of course, you may be familiar with the term *servant*, but it is important to keep in mind that the term used in the Greek text (*δοῦλος*, *doulos*) means, in its most basic sense, "slave."

Philip Towner writes concerning Paul's use of this term:

In the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures in which Paul moved the institution of slavery was based on a system of deeply rooted assumptions. The slave (or servant, *doulos*) was the property of the master and had none but qualified (and therefore extremely limited) rights, and a slave's existence was therefore

determined by servitude and submission to the authority of the master.⁹⁴

This is Paul's heart. He was firmly convinced of his calling as an *apostle* (one who has been specifically commissioned and sent out by Jesus Christ), but in that calling he did not hold delusions of grandeur. He first identified himself as a slave of God. We have an example to follow in this regard; to embrace the heart of a servant that Christ, who modeled the way as the Chief Servant, will surely give us as we abide in Him (Cf. John 13:1-17; Phil 2:5-8).

And why did Paul embrace his role as a slave of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ? For the sake of others! So that the elect might come to faith, grow in their faith, grow in their knowledge of Christ, and bear good fruit, living godly lives for God's glory. Paul's servanthood and apostleship are uniquely others-centered. In our time (and certainly in the first church), this "others-centeredness" stands contrary to all kinds of high-minded factions within Christian culture.

On the one hand, we have an ultra-corporatized and institutionalized segment of modern Christian culture that says: Go to Bible college and get smart; go to seminary and get smarter; then you are qualified to get a nice job at a nice church full of nice people where you are the boss, and people genuflect in your direction and call you Reverend or Pastor. The reality is far different, by the way, but we do not have time or space to cover those details here.

This type of religious pretense has always been around. Remember Christ's teaching:

⁹⁴ Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 665.

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation (Luke 20:46-47).

On the other hand, there are fringe elements of Christianity where people ordain *themselves* as Apostles, Reverends, Bishops, etc., with an eye to exercise totalitarian authority over those poor souls gullible enough to go along with the fraud in order to build their own brand, popularity, and often bank account. Perhaps a salient example of this type of behavior is found in Acts:

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God' (Acts 8:18-21).

Paul's own assessment of himself as a slave of God begs the question: How many of us, are willing to be ordained into the office of a slave of God, the least and the last?

What we are looking for in pastoral leadership are the marks of Christ. It ought to be evident in the lives of God's servants that all of the theology that we have wrestled with has not fallen flat and left us unchanged, or worse, caused us to be proud and arrogant; but instead that it has transformed our hearts and brought us to our knees before a holy God,

whereby we call out, “Oh God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”
(Luke 18:13)

God’s faithful servants bear the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ – humility, servanthood, compassion, and grace; not respecting their own merit but trusting wholly in the work of Christ for the sake of others and not for themselves. This is what the Bible teaches us about true Biblical authority in the church; and what the Apostle modeled for us in his own life.

Vv. 2-3 in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior;

As Paul is known to do, he continued in one meandering sentence, which concludes at the end of v. 4. However, here in vv. 2-3, we find some grand theological truths presented to us. This is important for us to understand because we are only a few verses into the letter – still in the introduction – and Paul is firmly anchored in the *eternal work* of God promised *before the ages began*. Whoa! That’s a big thought and it is difficult to wrap our heads around because we are finite, bound by time. And yet, God is not. What we know from this text is that before time, God’s promise toward the elect has always been eternal life. At the exact right moment in redemptive history, God revealed how eternal life would be granted to those who, by faith, believe – the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul uses similar language in at least

two other places concerning God’s perfect timing in revealing what he has promised “before the ages began” — salvation and eternal life.

In 2 Tim 1:8-11, he wrote,

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus *before the ages began*, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher (2 Tim 1:8-11, emphasis added).

In Gal 4:4-5, he writes, “But when the *fullness of time had come*, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4-5, emphasis added).

Here’s the point: Jesus Christ, when manifested in the flesh as the Word incarnate, marked the unveiling of God’s redemptive plan. Christ himself declared as much at the very outset of His ministry, saying in Mark 1:15, “The *time is fulfilled*, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (emphasis added).

This is the message that Paul was entrusted with, and this is the message which the church is entrusted with until the culmination of this age “for the sake of the hope of eternal life,”⁹⁵ which is the “confident expectation [of eternal life]

⁹⁵ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 380.

based on God's promise."⁹⁶ In other words, "'hope' is confidence in God's promises for the future."⁹⁷ We believe what God has promised in His Word, that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32).

Vv. 4-5 To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior. This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

Having introduced himself and anchored his ministry and calling in the service of God and the person and work of Jesus Christ for the advancement of the Kingdom and the declaration of the gospel, Paul now addresses Titus directly.

Titus is mentioned several times in the NT (2 Cor; Gal; 2 Tim). It is believed that Titus delivered Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Here Paul refers to Titus as his own true child in their shared faith.

Paul uses this type of family language throughout his writings as he refers to Timothy in like manner (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2) and also to the Corinthian church as a whole (1 Cor 4:15). For Paul, the faith that we share in common makes us more than just some hierarchical social club or philanthropic

⁹⁶ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992), 284.

⁹⁷ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 669.

organization; it makes us family, sons and daughters in Christ's Kingdom, fellow heirs of the promise of eternal life (Gal 4:1-7), brothers and sisters with a shared spiritual heritage having been birthed anew into this Kingdom by faith in Christ.

And as a member of God's family, Paul commends the attributes of our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ to Titus, which are ours as well – grace and peace. These are our birthmarks – grace and peace. If we are marked by anything, it ought to be grace and peace. We believe so strongly in eternal life, redemption, and forgiveness. Let us also believe in what God has promised to give us – grace and peace.

Finally, we come in v. 5 to the purpose of the letter. Titus has been charged with the enormous task of completing the work that was begun in Crete. It seems that the church in Crete was beginning to grow, and as it grew, a few things needed to be “set in order.”

We know that even as God's people are undeniably defined by the grace and peace of God, so His church is likewise marked by the same attributes. All things in the church, comprised of God's people, are to be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40) because “God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor 14:33).

So it is Titus' duty to ensure that this maturity is brought to fruition in Crete as well, and part of this growth includes the appointment of elders in accordance with God's plan for His church. It is a well established fact (though certainly there

is a minority who would challenge it) that in the NT, the terms *overseer*, *elder*, and *pastor* are all used interchangeably.

The impression from the text is that the churches in Crete (or at least a portion of the churches throughout Crete) were operating rudderless. They believed in Christ but lacked a biblical form of church leadership that God intended to equip the saints for the work of ministry. The churches in Crete either had unqualified pastoral leadership, or no leadership at all — both can be equally devastating for a church.

With regards to a lack of leadership — nobody at the steering wheel, as it were — we know from common experience that “nature abhors a vacuum.” No matter how “flat” an organizational structure may claim to be in the interest of “equality,” someone is always “in charge,” even if that is by informal means. In such instances, it is not uncommon for the strongest personalities to grab the wheel and steer the ship according to their own whims. For reasons that should be obvious, allowing persons who have the biggest personality to rule by informal means can be exceedingly dangerous. God has given us another way to lead our churches. But sometimes the mere thought of church government makes people squeamish.

However, no matter how much we may kick against the goad when it comes to church governance (for any number of valid reasons – we have been hurt by bad leaders and bad governance, or we believe we have found a better, more democratic way to lead), we must acknowledge that biblically

speaking, God has designed His church intentionally and purposefully for our good and His glory.

First and foremost, we must always bear in mind that Christ is the head of the church. He is the Chief Shepherd, the Senior Pastor, if you will. Everybody else, no matter the office they hold, no matter how big the church gets, is called to be a slave, a servant, an under-shepherd caring for Christ's flock, not under compulsion but willingly, eagerly, in humility, grace, and peace (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Paul wrote to the Ephesians,

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 (Eph 4:11-14).

There can be no denying it. God has not left us alone to construct the leadership of our churches according to our own whims and often faulty sensibilities. He has gifted His church with specific people to do a specific job so that all the saints may be equipped to serve Him. Leaving the finer points to the side for the time being this may cause us to ask, "What does the person that God calls to such a role look like?" And "How is the church to relate to those called to shepherd God's sheep?" That is what we shall endeavor to answer in the following material.

CHAPTER 2 | TITUS 1:5-9

In the previous material, we examined the introduction to this letter including: Paul's perspective of himself within ministry, his understanding of servanthood in the life of those called to serve Christ, and God's promise of eternal life given before time and revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We touched briefly on verse 5, which gives the purpose of this letter: to set things in order within the churches and appoint elders in every town where the local churches gathered. Now we come to the biblical qualification for one who is to be appointed as an elder in the church. These qualifications are also parallel to those found in 1 Tim 3:1-7. However, we need to consider a few points on church government, calling, gifting, qualifications, and prohibitions before we proceed.

First, in conjunction with the opening verses of this book, we must remain mindful of Paul's apostolic example, which sets the tone for church governance and godly, biblical, spiritual authority. Paul viewed himself as a slave of God, bound to carry out the commands and directives of the Father. He hung all his hope on the gospel of Jesus Christ and the redemption of humanity through Christ. He viewed his calling and qualifications as firmly anchored in these things and nothing else, having counted all of his personal accomplishments as nothing more than refuse for the sake of

Christ (cf. Phil 3:7-8). All of this helps shape our understanding of biblical church leadership.

Paul, who at times found it necessary to defend his apostolic authority against those who accused him of being ineffective and weak (see 1 Cor 9:1-2), was still cognizant of his inability to qualify for the apostolic office based solely upon his own merit. He expressed this understanding when he wrote to the Corinthians:

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me (1 Cor 15:9-10).

Paul understood deeply that save for the grace of God, he was lost and woefully unqualified for ministry.

As we examine the pastoral qualifications, we are reminded by Paul's own example that the man God calls to the work must resist the temptation to give voice to their own accomplishments, training, or moral superiority, as the basis for their qualification. First and foremost, our appeal is to the grace of God. Apart from grace, we are all unqualified. It must be God's grace that fuels us to "labor more abundantly" and marks our servanthood as we seek to steward faithfully whatever the Lord commits to our care, small or large (Matt 25:24-30; 1 Cor 4:2).

I say all of this because we can never simply take these following verses on the qualifications of elders out of the book, place them on a seldom visited shelf, and concede spiritual authority to the best dressed, most handsome, most

well-spoken of us. Neither can we use these qualifications found in the Pastoral Epistles (including 1 Tim 3:1-7) as some sort of personality test. The entirety of God's Word indicates that the person God chooses to shepherd his people are often the least and the last:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1Co 1:26-29).

Jesus Christ first presented this sometimes uncomfortable principle regarding the lowly estate of those called to serve in His Kingdom:

Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

This harmonizes perfectly with Paul's understanding of spiritual authority, ministry, and the shepherd God uses among His flock. Before we lay hands on anyone for pastoral ministry, they must bear the marks of Christ, the marks of a servant. These are described for us in the following verses.

Vv. 5-8 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.

To begin with, I would like to briefly examine the term *elder*, which can be used interchangeably with the related NT terms *overseer* and *pastor*. Paul’s use of the term *elder* offers an implicit qualification for those called to spiritual authority and pastoral ministry. The underlying term *πρεσβύτερος* (*presbyteros*) is used 66 times in the NT, nearly always in the plural form.⁹⁸ The word itself is an adjective but can be used as a noun.⁹⁹ This term is used many times in the NT to describe the general eldership of a community as the namesake literally means “older,” referring to both physical age and maturity.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ “ἐπίσκοπος” and “πρεσβύτερος” *Morphology Charts*. Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2014.

⁹⁹ A.C. Grant, “Elder, in the NT,” ed. James Orr et al., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 924.

¹⁰⁰ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 862.

However, this term began to take on a more formal definition within Christian circles, partly influenced by Jewish tradition. Louw and Nida note:

In some languages *πρεσβύτερος* is best rendered as ‘older leaders,’ but in other languages the more appropriate term would be the equivalent of ‘counselor,’ since it would be assumed that counselors would be older than the average person in a group as well as having authority to lead and direct activities.¹⁰¹

So then, those who are ordained as *elders* in a formal governance sense ought to be those who are characterized by maturity, wisdom, and experience.

That is not to suggest that we can place a definitive age requirement on elders. Remember Paul’s words to Timothy, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). It is totally possible for God to use those who are young in age but mature in Christ. And it is equally possible for one to be advanced in years and yet be a babe in Christ (Heb 5:12).

We also find that elders are to be “above reproach” or “blameless.”¹⁰² Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown remark,

The thing dwelt on here as the requisite in a bishop [elder/overseer], is a good reputation among those

¹⁰¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 542.

¹⁰² Some commentators prefer to attach this qualification to the home and family seeing this blamelessness as directly related to what follows. Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary 34 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 280.

over whom he is to be set. The immorality of the Cretan professors rendered this a necessary requisite in one who was to be a reprover; and their unsoundness in doctrine also made needful great steadfastness in the faith.¹⁰³

We expect those who shepherd God's people, being oriented upon the person and work of Christ, to bear fruit attesting to their godly living. This is not a show of moral superiority or self-righteousness, but the tangible evidence of being changed by the gospel they steward.

We also see in these verses that the qualified elder must have a godly family life both in their marriage and parenting. Adultery and/or unbiblical romantic relationships are expressly prohibited, and there must be sufficient evidence in the family life of the elder to indicate that their own families, their wives and children, are also believers.¹⁰⁴

Paul addresses this similarly in his writings to Timothy, asking the rhetorical question, “for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?” (1 Tim 3:5) And that is a fair question! We should be wise enough to discern that if one is not able to care for their own home, then certainly inviting them to exercise spiritual authority within the church will bring nothing but grief.

¹⁰³ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory*, 431.

¹⁰⁴ There is a discussion among scholars whether or not the phrase *μίας γυναικὸς ἄνθρωπος* (*mias gynaikeos aner*, lit. “a one woman man”) is meant to express a prohibition against second marriages or divorce; however, the evidence is inconclusive.

If those who aspire to the work of an elder care so little about the gospel that they do not ensure it is the bedrock and foundation of their own home, and their spouse and children are unaffected by it, they are accompanied by a party animal wife and unmanageable children, how can we expect them to faithfully steward Christ's sheep? We can't!

And those unruly members of the family, with a heavy influence on the shepherd, have the potential to invite chaos into the Body. This is not permitted. Instead, we are looking for those who are good husbands, good dads who care about the spiritual welfare of those closest to them. This is a good indicator of their heart and their backbone.

As Paul continues laying out the qualifications for eldership and reiterates that such a person must be above reproach, we see that he deftly shifts to using another term for the same office within the same scope and textual pericope – *overseer*.

A simple definition for the term overseer (ἐπίσκοπος, *episkopos*) is “one who watches over, [a] guardian.”¹⁰⁵ Another way to view this term is “supervisor” or “bishop,” with particular emphasis on the role of safeguarding that which is committed to the care of the overseer. BDAG notes that in the Greco-Roman world, such a person would typically have held “a definite function or fixed office of guardianship and related activity within a group.”¹⁰⁶ This bears on our understanding of the formality of the office. Louw and Nida,

¹⁰⁵ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 379.

¹⁰⁶ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 379.

appealing to the parallels of Christ’s ministry described in 1 Peter 2:25, note that this type of role, significantly peculiar to the Christian church, would have required unique spiritual oversight rather than simply general leadership.¹⁰⁷

Continuing with the qualifications outlined, we find that the elder/overseer must not be arrogant. This is in keeping with Paul’s assessment of himself as a slave of God and the least of the Apostles.

Humility is required in the pastoral office, not just at the beginning but in perpetuity. As it is written, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). No matter how big a church gets or how “successful” the elder is in the world’s eyes, God’s shepherds are not to be arrogant, proud, or puffed-up, but humble, gentle, peaceable, and having the mind of Christ.

Likewise, he must not be quick-tempered. The servant of God, overseeing His flock, must not have a short fuse.

He must not be a drunk! This seems pretty straightforward, and certainly, it is not too complex to understand. However, within the prohibition of drunkenness, we may also consider the attributes of self-control, sobriety (or sober-mindedness), and a clear head.

He must not be violent. The Greek term behind this relays the sense that elders must not be eager to fight or be a bully.

¹⁰⁷ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 462. Notably the term *episkopos* (in all of its forms) is found only five times in the NT. See also “ἐπίσκοπος” and “πρεσβύτερος,” *Morphology Charts* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2014).

Finally, before moving to the desirable attributes in an elder, he must not be “shamelessly greedy for money.”¹⁰⁸

In stark contrast to these negative character traits that mark much of fallen humanity, God has something else in mind that only He is able to bring to fruition in the lives of His people.

Christ’s under-shepherds must be hospitable – welcoming, warm, caring, and willing to fellowship with God’s people and make a place for them.

They must be lovers of good.¹⁰⁹ But that leads to the question— how do we know what is good in a world that advocates for subjective morality, postmodernism, nihilism, and the like? Well, God has revealed what is good to us in His Word!

In a brief yet potent definition of what God views as good, the prophet Micah records:

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
(Micah 6:8)

They must be upright. “In Gr[eco]-Rom[an] tradition...an [upright] pers[on] is one who upholds the customs and norms of behavior, including especially public service, that make for a well-ordered, civilized society.”¹¹⁰ This term also holds the sense of being just and fair.

¹⁰⁸ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ The Greek term is only one word (φιλάγαθος, *philagathos*) as opposed to our three-word English translation.

¹¹⁰ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 246.

They must be self-controlled, which we know to be one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). This indicates that they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit and bear fruit testifying to that truth.

They must be holy. Notably, the term that the ESV translates here as “holy” is a different term (ὅσιος, hosios) than we would normally expect (ἅγιος, hagios). Some translations prefer to translate this term as “devout.” That is to say that because of the work of Christ in their life they are “devout, pious, pleasing to God.”¹¹¹

They must also be disciplined, a character trait that merges nicely with self-control and holiness and is the very root of discipleship, a commitment to following Christ faithfully, intentionally, and with great care. We need elders/overseers/pastors who are disciplined in their own personal discipleship, who, like Paul, can in good conscience declare,

I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified (1 Cor 9:26-27).

We need pastors and Bible teachers who are willing to put in the work and are not prone to laziness or apathy, but instead discern the gravity of caring for God’s people.

V. 9 He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

¹¹¹ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 728.

Finally, we arrive at the culmination of the qualifications required by those called to shepherd God's people. They must hold firmly to the Word as presented in the Scriptures! They must hold a high view of Scripture and maintain a high priority on knowing the Scriptures, being grasped by them, and declaring them to others so that God's Word may accomplish its transforming work in the lives of those under their care. *And...*so they may also correct those who err.

This last point is vital for us to understand. Part of the work of the pastor is to correct those who oppose and contradict sound doctrine. The challenge is that few of us are ready to be corrected when we reveal our errant beliefs. We would much rather justify ourselves and defend our position than receive biblical correction. Nevertheless, that does not relieve the pastor of the biblical imperative to correct those who go astray. After all, isn't that part of the shepherd's job, to ensure that the sheep stay in the pasture?

Now, let us also understand that when we come to this tall task of offering biblical correction to a potentially hostile transgressor, we must also frame this correction within all of the other prohibitions and qualifications that we have reviewed.

If we offer up correction in arrogance, by brow-beating and bullying, in greed, or with a quick temper, no matter how doctrinally sound it may be, we ourselves are in need of biblical correction. The overseer of God's people must apply biblical correction with the heart of Christ and the steady, precise hand of a surgeon in maturity with self-control,

holiness, and even a little hospitality. As has been said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Joel Beeke and Nicholas Thompson offer a moving example of godly, biblical correction in their book, *Pastors and their Critics*:

[A church] member began to criticize the elders and the church [when] a godly and humble elder stood up, walked over to the angry member, and literally lay down on the floor in front of him. From his prone position, he then said in a humble and imploring tone of voice, ‘Dear friend and brother, I would rather that you walk all over me than hear you speak against my brother elders or persist further in your sin. Please stand up and walk over me; make me your floor mat. I would rather that you hurt me physically than injure your own soul for eternity or disturb the church with your criticisms.’ The genuine humility of this dear elder convicted this rebellious man. He broke into a flood of tears, repented of his sin on the spot, and confessed his guilt for speaking ill of the elders and for sowing seeds of discord in the body of Christ. And his repentance proved to be genuine.¹¹²

This is the heart of a godly pastor who cares enough about the souls of those under his care to be debased for their sake. This is godly correction with a view toward repentance, reconciliation, and restoration.

These are the pastors that God has truly called and appointed as His shepherds, elders, and overseers. And Christ

¹¹² Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson, *Pastors and Their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in the Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 84.

is faithful to qualify in all regards those He has called. May we who answer the call seek to be conformed to His likeness.

CHAPTER 3 | TITUS 1:10-16

In the previous chapter, we examined the qualifications required of an overseer in Christ's church. We discussed how the servants that God chooses bear certain marks indicative of their sanctification, attesting to whether or not they are fit for such a position.

The position of an overseer/elder/pastor among Christ's flock is fraught with many challenges and perils (even as it is marked by tremendous joy). So then, these men need to have their heads screwed on straight, and their hearts in sync with God's Word and the Holy Spirit.

In the list of pastoral qualifications that Paul gave to Titus, the final attribute deserves special attention because it is directly related to the text at hand. That final qualification is found in v. 9 and reads,

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

This qualification is deeply ingrained in many Christians who hold a high view of Scripture and place the highest priority on teaching God's Word expositionally.

However, we must come face to face with the sad reality that a high view of Scripture is not necessarily normative across the board, even among professing Christians.¹¹³

As we continue in Paul's letter to Titus, we see that Paul explains exactly *why* this requirement is so necessary, and why it is explicitly recorded in the Bible and not simply left as an unwritten rule.

Vv. 10-11 For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

The requirement to maintain a high view of Scripture was necessary (and remains so) because, within the church that Titus was charged with setting in order and appointing elders over, he faced a large faction of so-called Christians who would be a thorn in his side and a danger to the broader congregation.

Paul told Titus that there are *many* who are insubordinate. The original language conveys the sense of the term

¹¹³ The work done by liberal theologians in the 19th century vastly transformed how people understood and even approached the Scriptures; “their views severely undermined the historical reliability of the Bible and, hence, its authority as a document of divine revelation.” William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 101.

insubordinate as “refusing submission to authority, undisciplined, disobedient, rebellious.”¹¹⁴

So even as Titus proceeded with the work of setting things in order and appointing elders, he had to enter this work, a ministry many of us would be tempted to view as ideal (after all, it is church work!), with his eyes wide open, understanding that not everybody was going to agree with him or support his work or message. In fact, he would face many people who denied his authority in the church and directly opposed God’s Word, their conduct bearing witness to the blackened state of their heart.

The author of Hebrews wrote regarding spiritual authority within the church,

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith...Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you (Heb 13:7, 17).

Paul likewise wrote on this to the Thessalonian church,

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves (1 Thes 5:12-13).

And to Timothy, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17).

¹¹⁴ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 91.

So, part of God's design for His church is that the congregation remember, obey, respect, esteem, and honor those whom the Lord has called to this work. And, if we are being honest, *that* is a difficult teaching for some of us to hear, partly because unqualified pastors have used such verses to justify abusive power and weaponize God's Word to build their brand.

However, we must remember that God's Word requires godly, qualified pastors in the church to bear the marks of Christ, not abuse Christ's sheep, and serve with Christ's heart. They are to be marked by the biblical qualifications set forth for their service. That is why it is so important that we never thrust anybody into the pastoral office (or any position of authority) prematurely.

Ideally, when all of this comes together in the unity of the Holy Spirit and obedience to God's Word, we will find a healthy church. It is within this biblical ideal that we find what Robert Saucy calls "mutuality." That is to say,

As the operation of the human body demands the cooperation and dependence of its members one upon another, so the body of Christ demands a mutuality. Each member is not only related to Christ the Head, but also to each other. They are 'members one of another' (Ro 12:5; Eph 4:25). This implies dependence one upon another and a cooperative functioning of the body (1 Co 12:21-25). It also demands a loving concern through which each member enters into the very life of the others, experiencing their life with them.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1972, ebook), np.

In the ideal situation pastors and members of the body mutually submit to one another in love. Or, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21).

Far from the ideal, though, Titus is faced with a gang of “members” who are disagreeable, deny spiritual authority in the church, advance fruitless debates through empty talk, and by it deceive those they are supposed to be knit together with in the love of Christ (Col 2:2; 19) for personal profit. What a challenge!

Paul also noted that in Crete, as in other NT churches, the seeds of a syncretistic form of Jewish religious worship (characterized by circumcision) began to sprout and posed a significant threat to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul used the term “those of the circumcision party” to refer to their teaching that Christians must observe the Jewish law in order to be proper saints. And, of course, Paul spent much time in his own ministry refuting such heretical teaching (see Galatians for a masterful polemic against syncretism within the early church).

In quite a bold proclamation, Paul tells Titus that these kinds of people, the insubordinate, empty talkers, people who like to stir up controversy, and push legalism within the church, must be silenced because they are *upsetting* the faith of entire families. The sense of the term “upsetting” in the original language is “to jeopardize someone’s inner well-being ... [to] ruin.”¹¹⁶ So this is speaking about more than just

¹¹⁶ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 74.

emotional distress. The danger faced in Crete was spiritual ruin.

Part of the shepherd's work is to protect the sheep from savage wolves, even if they come clothed as sheep themselves (Acts 20:29). This difficult task falls on the shoulders of the eldership. And the primary recourse available to elders faced with such a task is to appeal to the proper application of God's Word. That is why they must faithfully hold to the trustworthy Word as taught. Nothing else will do – not bullying, intimidation, or clever debating. God's Word alone is the antidote for this poison that afflicts nearly every church at one time or another.

Vv. 12-14 One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.

To add weight to his instruction and “paint the picture” of what Titus was faced with at Crete, Paul actually quoted a Cretan poet named Epimenides whose work dates from around 600 BC.¹¹⁷ We understand that Paul was not referring to this man as a prophet in the biblical sense, but “reflecting the common reputation of Epimenides, whom Plato called a ‘divine man’ and of whom Aristotle said, ‘He used to divine,

¹¹⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 179.

not the future, but only things that were past but obscure”¹¹⁸
The value that Paul saw in this quote is that it gives voice to the challenges faced in Crete...by a Cretan, one of their own.

Paul’s use of this culturally appropriate quote reminded Titus (and reminds us) that this was hard ground for Titus to work, and he had to be mindful of that. This was not some cushy pastoral post but a difficult task that would require Titus to call upon every ounce of grace, wisdom, and biblical understanding that he had.

Interestingly, after Paul spent significant time presenting the characteristics of elders within the church, including the necessity of hospitality, not being quick-tempered or violent, etc., he then told Titus that he must rebuke these false teachers “sharply, severely, rigorously.”¹¹⁹ In this we find that Titus had to strike the right balance in his ministry endeavors.

The elders of the church cannot gloss over false teaching, deception, and legalism in the interest of cheap, superficial grace and peace; that is a one-way street to disaster. That would be like sitting on a ticking time bomb. They must address these issues head on and with the proper amount of boldness.

Jude presents us with a picture of striking the balance when he writes: “On some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh” (Jude 1:22-23).

¹¹⁸ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 179-180.

¹¹⁹ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 124.

Why are they called to this not-so-enviable task of correction? Not only to maintain orthodoxy within the church but also for the betterment of those who are in sin! Paul tells Titus that the entire objective for such strong correction, when needed, is so that they might be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and legalistic commands that people fabricate to portray some sense of self-righteousness.

The heart of the pastor, in unison with the heart of Christ, is for repentance, restoration, and reconciliation. Pastors are called to this difficult task because we are called to *care!* And part of pastoral care includes correction and, when necessary, church discipline. The author of Hebrews reminds us:

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.... For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb 12:6-8, 11).

Mark Dever offers a wonderfully gracious illustration of church discipline and pastoral correction:

Let's not pretend or presume that we are just as we should be, as if God had finished his work with us. Once we have come to that admission ... we should notice that discipline is often positive, or as it is traditionally called, 'formative.' It is the stake that helps the tree grow in the right direction, the braces on the teeth, the extra set of wheels on the bicycle. It

is the repeated instruction to keep your mouth closed when you're eating, or the regular exhortation to be careful about your words. Formative discipline refers to those things that shape people as they grow emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. . . . We're to practice church discipline because, with humility and love, we want to see good come.¹²⁰

The desire to see good come about in the lives of those who are in error is the biblical impetus for correction. And yet, our churches have swung wildly away from any form of correction because of past abuses.

However, to be obedient to God's Word, we cannot be held hostage by the abuses of the past carried out by hard-hearted pastors with an eye for retribution and shame. Rather, we look to the truth of God's Word, which tells us that there is a time and a place to correct those who are insubordinate, divisive, and deceptive. And this we shall do with the Lord's help and with a heart to restore those who err in grace and love.

Vv. 15-16 To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

I have often viewed verses 15 and 16 as indicative of how people respond to the world around them; to the pure, all

¹²⁰ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013, ebook), np.

things are pure. But, in reality, we see here that Paul is expounding on the teaching that Jesus presented in Matt 7:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits (Matt 7:15-20).

Paul is telling Titus, "If you want to know who is who, then discern the fruit in their lives. Are they pure, or not?"

We also see here in the text a terrifying glimpse of the false teachers in Crete that Titus had to contend with. They are *unbelievers*; the purity of their conscience has been polluted;¹²¹ they profess to know God, but their works don't align with their words; and they are disobedient (likely referring to whatever remnant of duly appointed authority the elders were holding onto for dear life at Crete). And since they are all of those things, they are disqualified from any good work.

These are not the men Titus was looking for in elders/pastors/overseers. Unfortunately, many of us have experienced a bloated procession of these types of people marching through our lives as we seek to follow Christ and remain in fellowship with His people, the church.

Please understand that God has not ordained this type of behavior in *anybody's* life, certainly not those called to

¹²¹ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 650.

shepherd His sheep. The Bible is clear about that. And yet, for all of the challenges presented in the text, there is hope. God has set faithful shepherds among His flock to protect His people and call those insubordinate and deceptive wolves in sheep's clothing back to faith, back to the cross, and back to Christ.

Perhaps Paul's instructions to the Ephesian elders are a fitting close to this discussion:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. *And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified* (Acts 20:28-32, emphasis added).

Knowing what was to come in Ephesus (which holds many similarities to what Titus faced at Crete), Paul commended the overseers of God's people, and the church itself, to the Word of God's grace. We trust the grace of Christ to perfect us, sanctify us, and build us up in unity with one another by His Spirit and for His glory. Do not be discouraged. The grace of Christ is sufficient in all of our labors.

CHAPTER 4 | TITUS 2:1-11

The opening verses of chapter 2 stand in stark contrast to the picture that Paul has already presented in chapter 1 regarding Titus' work in Crete. The development of godly, biblical churches in Crete was being stifled by many false teachers whom Paul characterized as detestable, disobedient, and unfit for any good work. Contra to how the Cretan churches were characterized, we find in the text at hand that Titus was instructed to present in his teaching and in his very life a vibrant gospel-centered response to the distorted teaching and behavior that was so unsettling in order to demonstrate the reality of God's Word.

V. 1 But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

We understand from the previous text that the churches in Crete were influenced by a host of empty talkers, deceivers, and insubordinate church members (cf. 1:10). Consequently, the gospel-centered ministry that Titus was charged to establish would come as a breath of fresh air to these churches, which had strained under the weight of heresy and spiritual abuse.

Notably, this includes the imperative to Titus that he *teach* the churches that which accords with sound doctrine. That is to say, he was to speak to the people on all matters of healthy biblical instruction, rejecting the quarrelsome, empty talk that

likely characterized at least some part of their church gatherings.

This is something that we should endeavor to emulate in our own gatherings; assigning a high priority on *teaching* the Bible, making a distinction between preaching and teaching.

There is no doubt that preaching is good and right, and there is certainly a place for it. However, on this point we must make a distinction, as the Bible does, between preaching and teaching. The NT uses different words for these activities, and we should attempt insofar as we are able, to bring the nuance out in how we explain the purpose of these two distinct functions without getting wrapped around the axle of semantic wrangling.

Preaching means to declare, often with the subtle characteristic of declaring the gospel to those who are unconverted or unbelieving in a public forum. Teaching means to instruct or expound upon a particular subject. In a biblical context, teaching is often marked by the subtle distinction of offering a deeper explanation of God's Word to those who are already believers and need to grow deeper in their understanding of the Bible.

When we consider the difference between preaching and teaching, we can see why teaching is so important regarding discipleship. Incidentally, this is partly why in our own tribe, we typically do not refer to pastors as preachers (even though the cultural tendency to do so in the South is deeply embedded in how we refer to the role of the pastor). We call our pastors, pastors, and part of their role is to *preach* the gospel and to *teach* the Bible.

Interestingly enough, the term translated as “teach” (λαλέω, laleōh) in this verse is not the usual Greek word we might expect to find to refer to teaching (διδάσκω, didaskōh). It is a milder term and could literally mean “speak.”¹²² The ESV Bible translators have offered the translation “teach” to describe what Titus was doing while speaking what accords with sound doctrine to a hungry congregation that has been so abused by bad teaching.¹²³

The contents of this sound doctrine, the message that Titus was to *speak* to the people, are presented in the following verses. Furthermore, as we will see, much of what he was to teach is quite practical. It deals with the substance of our lives, how we are to conduct ourselves in light of the gospel, in full view of a fractured and confused society, because what we believe does, in fact, bear on how we behave. The evidence of our belief is made real in our everyday lives as we bear witness to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this way, our lives become divine object lessons, living parables, in the midst of an unbelieving society. If you will, we become light in a dark place (Matt 5:14; Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5).

V. 2 Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.

¹²² Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 185.

¹²³ Other translations such as the NASB, KJV, and NKJV retain the term “speak.”

Continuing with the content of sound doctrine, we must understand that such healthy teaching is far more than intellectual assent; it manifests itself in holy living. In the following verses we find that Titus is commanded to offer instruction for nearly every demographic in the Cretan churches – older men, older women, younger women, younger men, and even bondservants. These instructions are equally applicable to our age.

The first exhortation given is for older men. Scholars have proposed various age groups that this might refer to,¹²⁴ but as cultures develop, the exact age of “older men” becomes less important. Nevertheless, we understand intuitively to whom Paul is referring – men who are advanced in years and, because of their relation to the gospel, ought to set the example for those coming behind them and for their own families. They should also set the tone for the churches they are a part of.

We expect those older men in our congregations to live in a dignified manner. That does not mean being haughty or condescending, but in a way that portrays the seriousness¹²⁵ and dignity of the gospel. They are to have clear heads, firm faith, fully convinced of the gospel, big hearts filled with love, and they are to model the way of steadfastness and endurance over the long term. Apart from our fabrications of over-the-top machismo, this is what the life of a man of God looks like – embodying the character of Christ.

¹²⁴ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 185.

¹²⁵ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 919.

Vv. 3-5 Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

Similarly, older women are to live in such a way that beautifully portrays the truths of the gospel. The first character trait commended to older women lays the foundation for the rest – they are to be reverent in their behavior, meaning they “must take seriously the fact that we [they] belong to God.”¹²⁶

They must resist the ever-present temptation of caving to “engagement in slander,”¹²⁷ which, in its simplest definition, means to speak ill or accusatively of others. Interestingly enough, the Greek term used here for slander is διάβολος (diabolos). In some instances, this word stands alone to refer to the devil, accurately capturing his slanderous work against the saints. We never want to engage in slander. It may seem like only a small thing, but it is the work of the devil.

Additionally, by virtue of their maturity in the faith and their role as exemplars to the church, older women are to

¹²⁶ Gottlob Schrenk, “Ἱερὸς, Τὸ Ἱερόν, Ἱερωσύνη, Ἱερατεύω, Ἱεράτευμα, Ἱερατεία, (-ία), Ἱερουργέω, Ἱερόθυτος, Ἱεροπρεπής, Ἱεροσυλέω, Ἱερόσυλος, Ἱερεὺς, Ἀρχιερεὺς,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 254.

¹²⁷ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 226.

ensure that they are not enslaved by the vice of alcoholism, correctly discerning the dangers of drunkenness.

They are to keep a reverent eye on their conduct with the express purpose of enabling them to teach what is good to the younger women in their churches.¹²⁸ Older women are responsible for passing on what they have learned to younger women. The term we have come to embrace to express this interaction best is *discipleship*.

In addition, the older women in the churches at Crete are here given the content of their discipleship message to those younger women: love their husbands and children, be self-controlled and pure, work at home, and be kind and submissive to their husbands.

While most of these exhortations to younger women are easy for us to understand, perhaps one deserves special attention – working at home.

The temptation for the modern reader is to interpret this passage anachronistically, meaning that we interpret instructions to the first-century church through our twenty-first century lens. If we are not careful in our handling of this text we can even weaponize this against working moms and view them as living contrary to God’s Word, or we can over-emphasize this exhortation and turn it into an inflexible legalism where younger women are prohibited from working outside the home.

If that ever becomes the case, then we need to spend some time considering Prov. 31, where we see a beautiful

¹²⁸ The ἵνα clause in v. 4 (and so train...) offers the purpose of their behavior. It could also be translated, “so that they may train...”

harmony of an industrious woman who “Seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands (v. 31) ... who considers a field and buys it (v. 16) ... who perceives that her merchandise is profitable (v. 18) ... who makes linen garments and sells them (v. 24).” These statements carry the sense of a working wife who still, “looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness” (v. 27). Pastor Sandy Adams remarks on these verses:

This doesn't mean that a mom should never venture into the workplace but it does mean that caring for the family should be her primary responsibility. The allure of an exciting career or extra cash has caused many young moms to downplay their domestic instincts. Your kids and husbands need you mom – no one can take your place. Whether or not a mom is employed, God wants her to give her family her best.¹²⁹

Before we conclude that Christian women are confined to their homes, we must understand the context of the first-century church and Greco-Roman society. These instructions were given within the societal context where it was exceedingly uncommon for women to work outside of the home. Overwhelmingly women *were* confined to their homes by societal expectations. So Paul is not crusading against working mothers — they would have been the minority. It can be presumed that the vast majority of the women who received these instructions were already at home. So then, this encouragement takes on a different dimension than a strict prohibition against working wives and mothers. I would

¹²⁹ Sandy Adams, “Titus 2,” Chapter by Chapter, YouTube video, https://youtu.be/Ji_KiR7iks

suggest that Paul is saying, “*While* you are at home (most of them were), be sure that you are not loafing around, enslaved to wine and gossip, but be productive in the space that you find yourself in.”

What is more, we see that Paul gives the express purpose for this exhortation which beautifully frames our endeavors – so that the Word of God may not be reviled (blasphemed).¹³⁰

What a shame it would be if our life choices bring the gospel of Jesus Christ into disrepute. This cautionary statement is equally applicable to all Christians, not just women.

Vv. 6-8 Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.

Similarly the younger men are to conduct themselves in a way that attests to the reality of the gospel and the person and work of Jesus Christ, namely in their self-control, which is one of the fruits of the Spirit and indicates that they have personally been changed by and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Many things compete for the affections of young men, but in devotion, by the grace of God, and the enablement of

¹³⁰ The Greek text uses the word βλασφημέω (blasphemeoh) which is the same term we use for blaspheme – “slander, revile, defame, speak irreverently/impiously/disrespectfully of or about.” Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 178.

the Holy Spirit, young men are exhorted to exercise that characteristic of holiness that so often eludes us – self-control. This is a call for young men to be different, separate, and distinct from their peers in a world that champions recklessness and indulgence among young men.

Paul commands Titus to model this in his own life, giving special attention to the soundness of his pastoral instruction in direct contrast to the false teachers who were troubling the churches in Crete. In direct opposition to their unsound teaching, emphasis on the doubtful, and legalism, Titus was to maintain integrity and dignity in his teaching with the express purpose of demonstrating that the truth of the gospel is unassailable.

This reminds us that we are to “practice what we preach.” Too often, the life-changing truth of the gospel has been undermined by people who proclaim grand biblical truths from lofty heights while living in the gutter. This disgraces the church and understandably causes outsiders to doubt the gospel.

Instead, by our conduct and integrity, we are to prove our detractors wrong exactly by how we live – because we are living in the light of Jesus Christ. And hopefully, those who contradict and criticize the gospel will be brought to their senses and realize that they have criticized Christ, His people, and His teaching unjustly.

Vv. 9-10 Bondservants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith,

**so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of
God our Savior.**

The final group of people that Paul addresses are those who are enslaved. Given the context of the book these would have been *Christian slaves*. We must note here that the Bible never endorses or validates the practice of slavery.

In fact, the gospel came into a broken and dark world and dealt with humans as they are, marred by sin. The solution to this darkness, which includes the practice of slavery, is the light of the gospel. The Bible teaches Christians, dear members of the Body of Christ, some difficult things about exemplifying the gospel in the midst of terrible situations.

The silver lining to this dark cloud of slavery is that the early church was composed of Jew and Greek, free and slave, men and women, all unified in Christ (Gal 3:28). All people, regardless of their station, are equal at the foot of the cross. And we are beautifully knit together in the love of Christ and the freedom that the gospel brings to our lives. Those who find themselves despised and enslaved by world systems have an important role to play in the kingdom – to live out the gospel for the glory of God.

Bearing this in mind, bondservants are to carry out their responsibilities, heavy as they may be, for the sake of Christ, who Himself became a bondservant for our sakes (Phil 2:5-8).

We noted earlier that our lives are living parables of the gospel. As much as the historical practice of slavery makes our stomachs turn, it may be that this particular group of

bondservants understood the meaning of Christ's own humiliation more deeply than anybody else. Those who have not suffered the injustice of slavery can only understand the work of Christ as a slave theoretically. Slaves in the first century, and even today across the globe, understand this condition intimately and are called by God to live in a way that embodies the person and work of Christ.

While their personal dignity may be denied by fallen and twisted humanity, they personally share in the humility, dignity, beauty, and adornment of God Himself, and are instructed to adorn whatever they put their hand to with the doctrine of God, looking to God as their defender and redeemer.

V. 11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,

Finally, we come to the crux of the matter; the "why" of it all. God's grace has shown forth, and it is the grace of God that brings salvation.

This is why how we live our lives matters: the salvation of others by God's grace. It is God's grace that enables us to live in a way that preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ louder than any sermon could.

CHAPTER 5 | TITUS 2:11-15

In the previous material, Paul presented brief instructions on exactly how believers ought to live. He addressed several distinct people groups: Timothy himself, older men, older women, younger women, younger men, and even bondservants (slaves).

In a neatly distilled form, his teaching communicates the sense that Christians are to conduct themselves in a way that does not bring shame upon the Word of God, our Lord, and our faith.

This makes perfectly good sense to us since we understand that those brought into the Kingdom of God are His ambassadors in this life. As ambassadors, we find ourselves in the unique position of being representatives of God's Kingdom here on earth, and would do well to conduct ourselves bearing this truth in mind no matter what station of life we find ourselves in (2 Cor 5:20).

We are not teaching some works-based righteousness or legalistic practice, though certainly some people have erringly leaned in that direction. Instead, we consider that legalistic tendency, which Paul is actually refuting, to be moralistic teaching that forces the issue of ethical behavior for the sake of "being a good person."

However, in the text at hand, Paul gives us the reason why we are to live holy lives before God. It is not merely because "it's the right thing to do," but rather because *God's grace* has appeared in the person and work of Jesus Christ being

offered to all people. It is that grace that produces holiness in our lives.

Paul explains this in the material at hand. Verses 11-14 are one long sentence with multiple clauses, in classic Pauline style. He is famous for writing really long sentences, which sometimes present interpretive difficulties to us. So let's take a look and see if we can properly understand what is happening.

V. 11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,

The reason why believers live their lives in a way that is demonstrably shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ – with sound minds, faith, love, hope, reverence, sobriety, good teaching, care for others, self-control, good works, integrity, dignity, sound speech, etc. (all of which are presented in vv. 1-10) – is exactly because the grace of God has appeared and caused us to do so.

In this verse, we find that God's grace, His favor and goodwill¹³¹ towards us, is the primary force that Paul describes as working so powerfully in the lives of the saints.

Throughout the Bible there are many examples of God's grace towards fallen humanity. But for the grace of God, we would all be lost! Most powerfully and most completely, God's grace was demonstrated toward us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. God loves His creation so much that by His will, and His own prerogative, He brought His grace near

¹³¹ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1079.

to undeserving humanity through the incarnation of the divine Word.

John writes poignantly:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:14, 16-17).

In that very real, very tangible expression of grace, robed in human flesh, salvation has been made available for *all* people! Paul's use of the term "all people" in v.11 is contextually significant.

Think about all the different people groups that Paul just addressed in the preceding material. The message is plain – regardless of one's social class, job, family, income, religious background, race, gender, or anything else, salvation has been brought near by the grace of God. God has applied His grace as the instrument to make salvation available to *all* people.¹³² Said more plainly, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

No matter where we come from or our station in life, salvation is available to us. And God's grace, by its very nature, affects change in the lives of those who, by faith, have believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ and received the grace of God. What are the effects of God's grace? Paul tells us–

¹³² Mounce notes, "This is not universalism but the P[astoral] E[pistles] theme that God's gift is available for all people, Jew or Gentile, slave or free." Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 422.

Vv. 12-14 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

God's grace changes us, makes us holy, and enables us, who once were woefully characterized as being darkness itself, to walk in the light:

[F]or at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord (Eph 5:8-10).

The terminology that Paul uses in v. 12 is quite interesting. He indicates that God's grace is the agent that *trains* us to live in holiness in the present, wherever we may find ourselves. The marks of our received salvation include renouncing ungodliness and worldly passions. That means that we actively "disregard" and "refuse to pay attention to" those things that are contrary to God's nature.¹³³ Since we have been brought into God's Kingdom by His grace, we are enabled by His grace to reject anything that is not aligned with God's holiness and pleasing to the Lord.

¹³³ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 133.

All the while, we keep our eyes and hearts fixed upon eternity, waiting patiently for our hope. It is God's grace that provides endurance and perseverance in the lives of the saints over the long term. We are a people who, by God's grace, focused on the eternal, have been gifted with a great hope.

What exactly is our hope? What is it that we keep our hearts hopefully fixed upon in the present as we seek to please the Lord? It is the certainty of Christ's promise that He shall soon appear, and even as He is making all things new, the culmination of His redemptive grace is at hand (Rev 21:5, 22:20).

Do you see how beautifully Paul has crafted this instruction? In v. 11, he refers to the grace of God that has appeared, which is the incarnation of Christ that first brought the fullness of God's grace to humanity. This refers to the present age, where we are shaped by the grace of God.

Then Paul refers to the final appearance of Christ, the culmination of His grace towards humanity. It is all quite poetic and reminds us of Christ Himself, who was, and is, and is to come (Rev 1:8). It reminds us of Christ's words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13).

It was Jesus Christ who surrendered His life on the cross for our sakes in order to redeem us from those things that formerly enslaved us (Gal 4:3-5). He did this to set us apart, *to sanctify us*, as a special people group united in Christ under His grace.

Moreover, since we are redeemed in Christ, we are to live our lives with a great fire in our bones to labor in God's

Kingdom for His glory and the good of others. This is what it means to be set apart and zealous for good works.

Contrary to some who view God's grace as a license for laziness, a non-committal attitude toward faith, and even sin, we are confident that the grace of God produces good in the lives of the redeemed. The Bible presents to us the truth that those who have truly experienced the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, and the sanctification of God, stand presently as God's representatives here on earth in hope and holiness. We are light in a dark place.

Paul expounds upon the intersection of grace and godliness to the Ephesians when he writes,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:8-10).

Sadly, some Christians have misused these verses as a proof text to argue that it doesn't matter what we do in our lives as Christians because God's grace is greater than we can ever imagine. And since God's grace has appeared to us while we were yet God's enemies (Rom 5:10), why do I have to change now?

That is not at all the case! We have been saved by grace, irrespective of our own merit, exactly *for* the work of God in this present age. Having been reconciled to God, do we intend to continue to live as His enemy? Certainly not.

Paul reinforces this message to the Romans,

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who

died to sin still live in it?... For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom 6:1-2, 14).

We are assured by the immutable Word of God that since He has saved us, He will undoubtedly bring about holiness in the lives of His people through His power. Part of God's sanctifying work in the lives of His people is to implant within us the intense desire, a fiery zeal, to accomplish the good work that He has set before us. This is the message that Titus was to present to the struggling churches in Crete.

V. 15 Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

We know from Titus 1:14 that the churches in Crete were conflicted over various spiritual-sounding teachings. The false teachers in Crete were promoting various myths with a Jewish flavor. They were also preaching a message that required people to obey various rules and commandments issued by religious-looking people. What a mess!

Could you imagine trying to navigate through the fog of religious gobbledygook, trying to discern what is right and wrong, all the while searching for truth? That is precisely what was going on. Remember that those myths and legalistic teaching about obeying the “commands of people” were all shrouded in the cloak of “Christianity.”

Here Paul instructs Titus to ensure that his teaching remained focused upon the grace of God as revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. All the moral-ethical

teachings of our faith are not the instrument of our salvation; they are the products of our salvation.

We cannot declare to people, “If you live your life as a good person, then you will be reconciled to God, and then He will bestow His grace upon you.” Instead, the message of the gospel is the exact opposite of that sentiment. “If you are reconciled to God by His grace, then you will live a godly life in hopeful expectation of Christ’s appearing.”

As Titus carried out this task, he declared these things in two major ways found in v.15. The first was to *exhort* those who received this message. To exhort somebody means to come alongside them and encourage them.

Certainly, much encouragement would have been needed in the Cretan churches where the flock had been so confounded by bad teaching. We need to be sensitive to this in our time as well. Many Christians have experienced the same type of religious manipulation that the saints in Crete did. Wounded believers need a reminder of God’s grace, the certainty of the gospel, the sanctifying work of Christ, and encouragement.

On the other hand, Titus was also supposed to *rebuke* those who did not hold to sound doctrine as clearly presented in the Scriptures. That means that in his pastoral work Titus was to “reproach, to reprimand, to censure, and to admonish someone with regard to ... wrongdoing.”¹³⁴ So, if there are bad actors in the church who are pushing bad doctrine and

¹³⁴ Daniel C. Arichea and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 129.

distorting the gospel, Titus has to say something! He has to say, “Enough! Knock it off!” And he has to do so courageously, being assured of his own authority, which is based upon the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is a time for those called to shepherd God’s people to do the difficult (and sometimes uncomfortable) work of rebuking the obstinate with the goal of seeing them come to their senses and restoring the unity of the church (2 Tim 2:24-26).

Many pastors are hesitant to do so for fear of being accused of being prideful. We must note here that the corrective work Paul instructed Titus to undertake was in response to bullies who were arrogant, prideful, and manipulative in the church.

More importantly, he was to protect the flock! Titus was to care more about the vulnerable saints and less about his own image and willingly put himself in a position where he could be unjustly accused while carrying out his pastoral responsibility.

A few years ago, I was meeting with some pastors. We were all sharing different things about our experiences and challenges. Then, my dear friend Paul Hammontree got up, walked over to a whiteboard in the room, and wrote on it in big letters: Courage doesn’t equal Pride; Cowardice doesn’t equal Humility. That is something for us to consider. I would suggest that the inverse of those statements is equally valid.

Carrying out God’s Work and rebuking harmful influencers in the body for the good of the saints, founded upon the authority of God’s Word, does not equal pride.

Those who meddle with God's people and seek to disturb their faith ought to take warning. Their schemes will not go unaddressed.

Finally, Paul offered to Titus some encouragement in order to steel his resolve in the face of a difficult task: "Let no one disregard you." Philip Towner writes, "The force of the command is personal.... "Titus, even if someone disrespects your authority, do not be dissuaded from your task."¹³⁵

Here is a call for perseverance in encouraging (and correcting) the saints – dig in, stay committed, keep the gospel of Jesus Christ at the forefront of our efforts, maintain the integrity of the gospel, and remind the saints of God's grace which is even now working in our lives.

¹³⁵ Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 768.

CHAPTER 6 | TITUS 3:1-15

In the conclusion of the book, Paul gives final instructions to the church regarding the how and why of godly living, grace, and good works over and against foolishness, disobedience, and hate. We find in the text that Jesus' followers, having been sanctified by Him, are to live in such a way that their very lives testify to that holy change wrought in them.

While we in the West live in a generally "Christianized" society, the same could not be said for the early church. The first churches were born into a societal ecosystem where prominent spiritual actors were already at play: the cult of the state, emperor worship, Judeo-pagan syncretism, cosmology [astrology], angelic worship, superstition, and the seed of Gnosticism.¹³⁶ Having been founded upon the gospel of Jesus Christ, these burgeoning churches were genuinely emblematic of the language that Jesus used in Matt 5:14-16 referring to His disciples as "a city on a hill," "a lamp on a lampstand," and a "light in a dark place."

In all of Christ's instructions on these things, we find that the renewing, sanctifying, life-giving work of God is not to be hidden out of the view of society, but plainly presented as the evidence of our salvation. That evidence of spiritual

¹³⁶ Though Gnosticism wouldn't come into its own until the 2nd century the beginning of the many variations of that concept began to show forth during the rise of the early church.

transformation born out in how we live is not merely a fabricated demonstration of piety but a real substantial change. Christ's followers are a people born anew of the Holy Spirit and, in the words of John Foreman, people who have found "a new way to be human."

As the song says:

Every day, it's the same thing
Another trend has begun
Hey kids, this might be the one
It's a race to be noticed
And it's leaving us numb
Hey kids, we can't be the ones
With all of our fashions
We're still incomplete
The God of redemption
Could break our routine
There's a new way to be human
It's nothing we've ever been
There's a new way to be human¹³⁷

Paul instructed Titus to *remind* the church of these things. What we have before us is a restatement of much of what Paul has already written, not only in this letter but in all his writings.

In the previous chapters, Paul has labored long, instructing the church on the moral results proceeding from their faith in Christ. Now he reiterates exactly those same points – what we believe determines how we behave. A corollary may also be drawn— how we behave gives voice to what we believe. God's people are to be different from the society we move among. We are people of the good message,

¹³⁷ Switchfoot, "New Way to be Human" (re:think Records, 1999).

the gospel, that Christ has come to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Each of our lives is a public billboard that declares that fact in all arenas of life.

Vv. 1-2 Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

The work that Titus was instructed to continue included a *reminder* to the congregation on how they related to “rulers and authorities.” The language is critical here because *to remind* someone of something implies that they have already been instructed in these things, but now comes the task of calling to mind what has been presented as right and good as far as Christian conduct is concerned.¹³⁸

The command to be submissive to rulers and authorities refers to governmental authorities and is recounted elsewhere in the NT (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-14). The general sense presented throughout the Scriptures is that God has instituted or allowed various governments to rule across the ages for His own purposes, even if those purposes are not immediately apparent to us. Perhaps more challenging to us, God has allowed governments to rule, and to sometimes serve as the instrument of His wrath, that were (are) deeply

¹³⁸ I. Howard Marshall and Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 300.

corrupted and even worshipped a multitude of false deities (i.e., Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt in the OT).

This is perplexing and yet we are citizens in God's Kingdom and we continue as pilgrims in a strange land (1 Pet 2:11), letting our conduct, speech, and faith bear witness to our heavenly citizenship. We "speak with an accent," as it were, that is easily discernible by those who do not belong to our Kingdom. The Bible clearly presents to us that part of godly living includes living in meekness and submission to human authorities as God continues to advance His Kingdom. Regarding the following list of actions that Christians are to live by (Paul loved lists), Marshall and Towner suggest,

These can be analysed [sic] in terms of content ... as expressing four basic requirements arranged in two pairs: subjection to authorities and readiness for good works; non-aggression and showing patience to everybody.¹³⁹

We see these born out here in the text. We could spend much time examining each one, but suffice it to say, as we have been saying all along, how we live matters, and Christians are to be distinctly different from those around us in word and deed; two elements which are complementary to one another.

How we treat people matters! We are not permitted to seek to establish our own kingdom by treachery, scheming, or a bullsh nature. That is the work of the devil! Because of the gospel we desire to participate in the work of Christ. So when

¹³⁹ Marshall and Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 300.

we look at this list of how to live, we see that all these attributes are embodied in the person and work of Christ.

V. 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

In v. 3, Paul gives the logical explanation for why we are to live our lives following the example of Christ. And the reason is quite simple – we, too, were once wretched! We were exactly the type of people that some sanctimonious Christians like to rail against and advocate for their downfall and destruction.

The sin-infected flesh of humanity loves to destroy other humans. In our darkened state, apart from Christ, we too once loved speaking ill of other people, arguing, and withholding courtesy; it made us feel morally superior, right, better. We loved indulging in the pleasures of sin, or we would not have done it.

We were precisely the grossly distorted version of humanity Christ came to save. So then the logical result of having been delivered from such wretchedness is a change of heart, which the Bible calls compassion (Luke 7:47).

When we look back on our lives and understand what foul, hateful conduct we engaged in before we came to Christ and were made new, how can we look down on those who are still trapped in the dark maze of selfish human ambition and relative morality? The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way

out, and it is the gospel that Paul commends as the solution for our past wickedness, enabling us to dispense with all of the hate we have been infected by and offer love and grace.

Vv. 4-8 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

In direct opposition to humanity's malice, envy, and hateful nature, God demonstrated his eternal characteristics of goodness, love, and kindness in Jesus Christ toward His enemies. In spite of our humanly contrived works, meant to give us a sense of our own righteousness, and because of His mercy and grace in the face of our rebellious, hateful hearts, God has saved us through Jesus Christ and has gifted us with the Holy Spirit and Himself, to affect regeneration in our lives.

This is the gospel! And as we see, the gospel is not simply a mental exercise to participate in. It is a life to be lived out as heirs of an eternal Kingdom.

This is the crux of the matter. Titus was commanded to *insist* upon these things. When quarrels arise and people get the itch to follow after something else or apply their efforts toward some earthly cause cleverly robed in spiritual clothing, we, like Titus, are to bring them back to the truth and remind them that the gospel is the center and foundation of our faith. It is the gospel that brings about any good work that has true staying power in our lives. As participants in the gospel, we are to devote ourselves to good works for the glory of God and the good of others, even those who are still trapped in the dark maze we once wandered in.

Vv. 9-11 But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

In vv. 9-10, Paul presents those other causes that tempt us to diverge from the gospel. Many Christians have applied themselves to these controversial issues under the errant belief that they require their attention. Not so!

Paul already laid down the foundational principles for how we ought to live in light of our regeneration in Christ. We are to be about the Father's business, be devoted to good works, and cast off wickedness, hate, and vile speech. He then expressly turns his attention to presenting those things we are explicitly forbidden from participating in: foolish

controversies (there are many that compete for our attention), genealogies (which may indicate the seed of early Gnosticism),¹⁴⁰ divisive issues, and legalistic wrangling.

Essentially, Paul was saying that the person who has been made new in Christ has a duty to actively avoid participating in controversial arguments over things that do not matter. Wading into the mire of spiritual-sounding controversies in order to “set the record straight” or “offer an opinion” are of no benefit to anybody (versus the good works that are profitable for others). More often than not, these disputable matters that we are tempted to engage in serve as just one big diabolical distraction from the heart of the matter, the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁴¹

It appears that in light of these controversial issues, the church and Titus himself were supposed to take a stance, and that stance was to warn those who indulged in these fruitless controversies and implore and remind them (v. 1) to come back to the center, to the gospel.

Similarly, Paul instructed Timothy on how to correct those who are going off the rails and find themselves enmeshed in doctrinal error:

And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their

¹⁴⁰ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 41.

¹⁴¹ See Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* for a more complete treatment.

senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Tim 2:24-26).

We pray that those Christians who have been enticed to leave the gospel behind in pursuit of something else will come to their senses.

The temptation to plant our flag in the middle of controversial, debatable, spiritual-sounding arguments is because we think we are doing the right thing and have found the solution, the “silver bullet.” Being deceived and misguided, we view ourselves as some sort of spiritual crusader with the appropriate level of moral conviction (which others lack) to stand up for what is right. However, our efforts are often misapplied to issues that Paul calls here “unprofitable and worthless.”

In such instances we find that it is necessary for sound pastoral correction, but we must also note the conditions here. Paul presented Timothy with somewhat of a “two-strikes” rule. The point is not to be overly formulaic and say, “Well, you get two chances, and that’s it.” Rather, the point is that if somebody engages in controversial issues but in their obstinance does not receive the biblical correction to “get it together,” *they are unlikely* to “come to their senses.” In such instances we would be wise to avoid getting sucked down that rabbit hole of controversy with them. Titus was commanded to “have nothing to do with them,” which is a scary prospect.

Essentially this is a command to cut them loose (cf. 1 Tim 1:20; 1 Cor 5:5). So we see here a biblical precedent to disassociate with people who are stubbornly committed to crazy talk.

Remarkably this is not the only instance in the NT where Christians are instructed to break fellowship with somebody from within their church. In a situation of gross sin within the church at Corinth, Paul instructed the Corinthians to “purge out the old leaven from among you” (1 Cor 5:7). Leaven, or yeast, is commonly used in the Bible to represent sin, and we have a duty to ensure that sin does not take root in our churches. Those types of people bring condemnation upon themselves, and, left unaddressed, can invite every sort of warped doctrine, living, and sin into the church – “a little leaven, leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9). So Titus, the Cretan churches, and we ourselves are to be mindful of this in our congregations as well. We cannot knowingly allow sin to permeate the Body of Christ, for, in doing so, we invite great harm upon Christ’s flock.

It is interesting that Paul’s final words to Titus regarding church conduct were to watch out for warped “believers” who have become habitually concerned with stirring up controversy. Perhaps there is a lesson here for us. We should not turn a blind eye to this. But anchored firmly in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must remain committed to guarding the good deposit that we have been entrusted with (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14).

Let me offer one word of caution. This does not mean we should spend all or even most of our time chasing ghosts or going on spiritual witch hunts. We need to be discerning about what we are engaged in ourselves, and we need to take careful stock of what we are applying ourselves to. Is it the gospel of Jesus Christ or something else?

Vv. 12-15 When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. Do your best to speed Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way; see that they lack nothing. And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful. All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.

In these closing verses, where Paul offers some instructions on ministry, we see that Paul, the early Apostles, and pastors were closely connected. They were all working toward the same goal – the advancement of the Kingdom of God by the declaration of the gospel. Paul and his co-laborers for the gospel were all substantially engaged in the work of the ministry. Although we often find ourselves dispersed throughout the Kingdom, we must remember that this is not a one-man job.

Titus was to ensure that these fellow workers for the gospel were cared for, “lacking nothing.” This informs our attitude toward our fellow servants, born out of mutual love for one another. We are to care for each other as best we can and are to be concerned for the welfare of one another.

The church has a part in this, too. They are to be committed and devoted to good works in Jesus’ name, meeting urgent needs as Paul underscores what he has been driving at this whole time. Christ’s people are not to be some

barren wasteland of withered, fruitless trees that engage in the gospel only once a week. We are to bear good fruits, good works, attesting to that transformative work of the gospel in our own lives. Everybody has a part to play. There is no imperative here for the church to “let pastor Titus do the work by himself.” The church itself is to be engaged, productive, and fruitful exactly because the gospel has brought them new life.¹⁴²

Finally, Paul ends in classic style by commending the grace of God to Titus and to the church. It is God’s grace that enables us to bear good fruit in our lives. It is God’s grace that has saved us. It is God’s grace that we are to extend to others who are wretched and lost as we remember where we came from ourselves – out of darkness into the light of Jesus Christ. Let our lives be marked by grace. Let our churches be marked by the grace of God. Amen.

¹⁴² Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 802.

PART III

PHILEMON

CHAPTER 1 | PHILEMON 1:1-16

Written in Rome around 60-61 AD during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, the book of Philemon is closely connected with the book of Colossians.¹⁴³ Three of the men mentioned in this letter were residents of Colossae: Philemon, Onesimus, and Archippus (Col 4:9, 17).

Paul's Christological emphasis contained in Colossians over and against the various competing syncretistic views of faith and religion is profound. It is this same high Christology that marks Paul's letter to Philemon.

We find in this, the shortest of all the Pauline epistles, that Paul is firmly convinced that the person and work of Jesus Christ are sufficient to bring about reconciliation in the lives of the saints, not just in a general, theoretical sense, but in a real, practical, individualized sense. Because of Jesus Christ, we as believers are able to reconcile with those who have wronged us, and this should especially be the case when those we are in conflict with are fellow believers. This is precisely the situation outlined here in Philemon.

Paul wrote this letter advocating for a man named Onesimus, who was part of the sprawling slave class of the

¹⁴³ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, Fifth Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 456.

first-century Greco-Roman world.¹⁴⁴ Onesimus was part of a marginalized group of people with very limited rights.

This concept perplexes us because our modern understanding of slavery has been resolved, and we view the institution of slavery as abominable. It confounds us to think that a person called a Christian could own a slave at all! On this point, we must note that even as some detractors of the Bible assert that the Scriptures endorse slavery, that is not the case at all. Rather, the Bible itself faithfully records the human condition in all its shades – both admirable and abominable. There are great truths about the human condition recorded in the Bible that make our stomachs turn and further magnify the root of the issue – humanity needs redemption. Jesus taught that our greatest obligation is to love God above all, and our neighbors deeply. In our fallen state, we have violated God’s holiness by sinning against Him and against our fellow man, which is precisely why we, as a universal people group, are in desperate need of divine reconciliation.

Prior to his conversion, Onesimus was afflicted by the vile practice of slavery, and he set out to do something about it; to free himself, leading to his escape and likely theft of his master’s goods.

This is not too terribly surprising. Throughout the ages, human beings have sought to free themselves from the yoke

¹⁴⁴ Gundry suggests, “Especially in cities, slaves may have numbered nearly as many as free people. Slavery was not racially based. It had been common to condemn criminals, debtors, and prisoners of war to slavery; but by the first century most slaves were born as such.” Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 54.

of bondage (literally and figuratively) in search of freedom and equality. This kind of “bondage” language serves as a helpful tool to understand spiritual truth concerning the universal condition of spiritual enslavement apart from Christ (Cf. Rom 6). While the book of Philemon is a personal appeal for the reconciliation of two men at opposite ends of the economic and social spectrums, it also serves as a divine metaphor illustrating this grand spiritual truth: We were, all of us, once enslaved; in desperate need of liberation. As Paul wrote to Titus:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another (Tit 3:3).

What is clear from reading this letter is that Paul loved both Philemon and Onesimus deeply. He was instrumental in both of them coming to faith in Christ, and both of them lived vastly different lives at opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum: slaveholder and slave. Nothing could be more opposite. And yet, in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ and His work, they are both equal and share the same need: reconciliation with one another, unity in the Spirit, grace, and love, even while the wounds that each has inflicted upon the other are still fresh.

What’s more, God uses this letter, these two men, and their trying relationship and circumstances as a divine object lesson to the church¹⁴⁵ – be reconciled to one another, forgive, and love radically, even when you have been

¹⁴⁵ John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 348.

wronged.¹⁴⁶ Matthew Henry summarizes the universal application of this letter:

We, like Onesimus, were revolters from God's service, and had injured him in his rights. Jesus Christ finds us, and by his grace works a change in us, and then intercedes for us with the Father, that we may be received into his favour and family again, and past offences may be forgiven; and we are sure that the Father heareth him always.¹⁴⁷

Vv. 1-3 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As previously mentioned, Paul was imprisoned by the Roman government when he wrote this letter. At the outset, he calls attention to his imprisonment for the cause of Christ.¹⁴⁸ This will prove to be significant as he proceeds in a

¹⁴⁶ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 170–171.

¹⁴⁷ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2376.

¹⁴⁸ A simple, literal reading of Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ could read, “Paul a prisoner *of* Christ Jesus.” The ESV’s interpretive decision to translate this as “Paul, a prisoner *for* Jesus Christ” relates the translators’ exegetical decision on the function of the genitive case in this instance. While this translation holds merit it perhaps deserves further examination. (Emphasis added)

somewhat “delicate”¹⁴⁹ situation advocating for the rights and reconciliation of a runaway slave. Paul, the prisoner, sharing in the unenviable condition of bondage (just one aspect of his many sufferings for the gospel), perhaps understood Onesimus’ condition of bondage better than anyone.

There is something else remarkable in these opening lines that may be noticeable to the trained eye. Paul did not refer to himself as an Apostle, contrary to his common custom wherein he applies that title to himself when writing to the churches as a reminder of his apostolic authority in Christ. The exclusion of this term, which held so much weight in the early church, presents a somewhat less formal tone than Paul’s other letters to the churches. He deferred the title “Apostle” in favor of a more personal, heart-to-heart exchange, debasing himself, as it were.

Notice, too, that Philemon, the slaveholder who was also a Christian (terms that seem irreconcilable to us), hosted a fellowship of saints in his home – a house church. It was common for churches to meet in homes during this stage of church history. More important to our discussion, though, is that Onesimus, the runaway, would have been part of this household. He had *already* been exposed to “church.” However, for some reason, his encounter with the house church hosted by Philemon did not produce any great, instantaneous change in his life (though perhaps it started him down the road of faith). He still ran away, seeking his freedom, seeking something else. And in God’s divine plan, he had a personal encounter with the imprisoned Apostle

¹⁴⁹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 170.

Paul and encountered the gospel of Jesus Christ, which made him freer than he had ever been, and perhaps ever imagined possible.

Vv. 4-7 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Even as we wonder why the church in Philemon's home had such a muted effect on Onesimus, we see that Paul does not paint Philemon as the bad guy. Apparently, Philemon had a deep love for the saints and the Lord and was a man of substantial faith.

Philemon had a sterling reputation in the church and such a deep faith; yet Onesimus was unchanged. This causes me to wonder if these two men were not simply "talking past each other," as we can do so often. That can happen sometimes. We can have sincere love and faith. We can be people of the gospel and of principle, sharing our faith and encouraging the hearts of the saints, yet there are those people in our lives who seem unaffected and ready to run away.

When that happens, we wonder why? What did I do wrong?

Even as our curiosity seeks an answer, Paul does not give one here. Nowhere in this entire letter did Paul analyze the past relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, nor did he assign fault or blame to any one party. Paul's intention was not to dig up the past but to remind these men of their now common salvation and bring them to a place where they would love one another deeply. There is a lesson here for us.

As stated, we often want to know what went wrong, for various reasons. In our better moments we realize that we are not perfect and will undoubtedly make missteps along the way in our relationships, but we want to learn from our failings and do better. In our worst moments, we want to vindicate ourselves of any wrongdoing at all and paint the other person as the villain. None of that occurs here; just a simple and heartfelt call to forgive, reconcile, and love as Christ loves.

Moreover, the stakes in this particular context could not be higher! Runaway slaves in the first century could be viciously punished, even executed. However, we know that this is not the heart of Christ, who is mercy and grace incarnate among humanity. Even as we are forgiven and have received the mercy and grace of Christ, we must also forgive those who wrong us (Matt 6:12; Luke 7:47).

Vv. 8-11 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my

imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)

In these verses, we see just how much Paul trusted Philemon to do the right thing. Being an Apostle and sure of what the gospel requires of believers in the realm of forgiveness, Paul could have just commanded Philemon to bring Onesimus back into his home. However, that is not how Paul approached the issue.

Now, we know from all of Paul's letters that he was not afraid to issue biblical commands to those who needed firm instruction. His letters are filled with commands and prohibitions. We also know that Paul's relationships with some of the churches were tense at times (i.e., the Corinthian church), but he never shrunk back from plainly instructing them to do what is right and good and biblical. That is part of the job sometimes. There are times when we need to remove all ambiguity from our instruction, speak plainly, and remind God's people of the imperatives that spring from our faith so that we might live in holiness and a manner that is pleasing and acceptable to God.

If we can be honest for a moment though, most of us would much rather make a heartfelt appeal to God's people to consider our shared faith and live in a way that demonstrates the reality of our faith rather than just commanding others what to do.

In like manner, just as Paul does not issue a binding command to be followed, neither does he appeal to his

apostolic authority, his charisma, or his youthful zeal to get the point across.

By this time, he was an old man and a prisoner of the Roman Empire. He had suffered much for the cause of Christ and was under no delusion that the way of the cross was the road to an easy life. In this, we see Paul's humility. Paul chose to stand solely upon the gospel and the primary characteristic of Christ's disciples – love!

Jesus taught, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Paul loved both of these men very much and explained to Philemon just how much he had come to love Onesimus, using family language to describe their relationship. This elevated Onesimus from a one-time runaway slave in danger of prosecution to a son of the gospel, a son of God, and, in Paul's eyes, his own son.

Paul had a tendency to grow very close to the people he disciplined, often describing his relationships with them in familial terms, not as some form of religiously charged superficial label as some do, but as a substantial declaration of shared intimacy with those whom he led to Christ. He called both Timothy and Titus his true children in the faith and referred to the Corinthian church in the same way (1 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; 1 Cor 4:15).

This is important because it lets us know that Onesimus was not just a project Paul had been working on. He stood on equal spiritual footing with Timothy, Titus, and all the saints who viewed Paul as a father figure in the faith. And Paul remarked on the vast change in Onesimus' life. It is here that

we must view Onesimus with a clear eye. There is no indication that before Christ, he was some sort of moral exemplar. On the contrary, he was once *useless* but now useful – in fact, Onesimus’ name means “useful.” He’s new! He’s changed. He’s living up to his namesake.

Vv. 12-14 I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

Paul made a major decision that is quite challenging to us. *He sent Onesimus back to the man he ran away from!* We can assume that Paul and Onesimus had discussed this course of action and the many sticky problems associated with it, including reconciliation. Perhaps that is the whole point of this letter. But, of equal importance, Onesimus, whom Paul found to be quite profitable for ministry and service in the Kingdom, was given the opportunity to “spread his wings” and live out the gospel in real life, even if that meant walking back into a difficult situation. Onesimus and Paul took a risk for the gospel’s sake. And Philemon was presented with the opportunity to take a risk, as well, and put his faith into practice.

This man who hosted a church in his own home, who professed to believe the gospel and was such a blessing to

other Christians, would now have his own faith and faithfulness tested. Would he be able to receive a fellow son of God back into his home? Would he be able to exercise the same warmth and forgiveness as the father in the Parable of the Prodigal (Luke 15:11-32)? Would he be able to exercise the same mercy and grace that God had extended to him? Would Philemon be able, by the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God, to link arms with Onesimus, stand in the unity of the Spirit, and love this man unconditionally for the sake of Christ and the advancement of the Kingdom? This is the very real and sometimes challenging work of the gospel!

For the Christian of our time, we can be certain that these same questions will confront each of us at one time or another. We have much to learn from this example, even as these questions regarding Philemon's response are left unanswered. We do not know how this turned out in the end, but church tradition holds that Onesimus was granted his freedom by Philemon and went on to be a bishop in the early church.¹⁵⁰

Vv. 15-16 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁵⁰ Incidentally, some believe that this same Onesimus later became the Bishop of Ephesus, mentioned in Ignatius' writings, but it is not possible to make a decisive judgment on the matter. Joseph Barber Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, Eph 1.3 *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891), 137.

With remarkable insight, Paul gives a possible reason for all of the distressing events that had occurred between Philemon and Onesimus – God was at work on their behalf to knit these men together in the gospel.

Sometimes when our relationships deteriorate, we wonder “why?” We want to understand not just the cause but the purpose. Paul offers a view of these events in light of God’s Kingdom and sovereignty. Perhaps this all happened to bring Onesimus into the Kingdom (into a right relationship with God) and into a right relationship with Philemon once and for all.

It has been said, “Sometimes we can’t look up until we are lying flat on our backs.” That seems applicable here. Both of these men needed to go through this difficult event to see the larger redemptive plan of God at work. And, we must ask ourselves, is our momentary suffering and loss worth the salvation of one person? I think so. It is hard for us to embrace that in the moment of our suffering, but how joyful it is when we see the fruit of our hardship.

By the gospel Onesimus was changed into more than a slave. Sharing in the condition that Paul often applies to himself, he became something greater — a slave of Christ. This speaks to the fundamental change in Onesimus’ life. He was no longer raging against his condition or circumstances. Instead, having found true freedom in Christ, he committed to something greater than himself and boldly, willingly walked back into an uncertain situation as a changed man

bearing the gospel of Jesus Christ and bound to His will for the advancement of the Kingdom of God and reconciliation.

And now, it is Philemon's turn to exercise his faith not by force or merely because it is the right thing to do but exactly because Philemon is *also* a slave of Christ, bound to His will. In this letter, Paul says to Philemon: Prove it.

CHAPTER 2 | PHILEMON 1:17-25

As we finish the book of Philemon, we are reminded of the significance of forgiveness, reconciliation, grace, mercy, and fellowship as part of the fruits of our faith in Christ.

Onesimus was a runaway slave who hailed from Colossae and was owned by Philemon. Philemon was a Christian with a good reputation for faithfulness and encouraging the saints. While we are perplexed by how these seemingly juxtaposed institutions (the Christian faith and slavery) intersected in the first century, and we crave a satisfactory answer, we must admit that the book of Philemon does not totally assuage our concerns on the matter. Nevertheless, what this book does show us is that for the Jesus follower, there is a way forward in the wake of tremendous sin and hurt.

After Onesimus escaped from slavery, he received the gospel of Jesus Christ through the loving ministry of the Apostle Paul, was born anew into God's Kingdom, and was awarded true freedom and a glorious heavenly citizenship.

In Philemon, Paul placed the onus for reconciliation squarely upon Philemon as a fellow participant in the gospel.¹⁵¹ Philemon was presented with the glorious opportunity (and Christ-centered duty) to accept this one-time slave as a brother. This is what Paul has been driving at

¹⁵¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 426.

through the preceding verses – remaining focused on bringing about reconciliation and unity in the lives of two men who were sorely divided.

Based upon their newly established shared faith in Jesus Christ, their common citizenship in God’s Kingdom, and their equal standing in the gospel (Gal 3:8), Paul offered these two men the challenging opportunity to take a chance on one another, to love deeply, to defer recompense for past wrongs, and to be reconciled.

As has been noted, the book of Philemon and Colossians are closely related to one another. Philemon himself was a resident of Colossae. And it was to the Colossians that Paul wrote quite strongly:

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Col 3:11-13).

Onesimus was urged on to the difficult task of entering back into the life of his former master, bearing the gospel of Jesus Christ; and Philemon was called to receive Onesimus as a brother in the Lord, exemplifying the gospel in real life and taking hold of the message that Paul had written to the Colossians – there is neither slave nor free, but Christ is all, and in all. This is radical gospel living.

Here we find that not only are Christians afforded the opportunity to participate in forgiveness and reconciliation through the gospel, but we have also been charged with the

sacred responsibility of bringing about reconciliation for the sake of the gospel and the unity of the Body of Christ (2 Cor 5:18). Paul's instructions to the Ephesians bear on this point:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is *one body* and *one Spirit*--just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph 4:1-6, emphasis added).

To refine our understanding of reconciliation we may also appeal to the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). While the parallels between that parable and this historical example of slave and master being reconciled in Christ are not perfect, we do see a glimpse of what Jesus taught on the matter of grace and reconciliation in that parable being practically applied in the lives and context of these men – elevating the theoretical into the very real, practical, and often messy sphere of human relationships.

Just like in the parable of the prodigal, the gospel of Jesus Christ elevated Onesimus from a one-time runaway slave to a son of God and an heir of Christ solely by virtue of God's grace. Speaking in general terms in Gal 4:7, Paul wrote about the condition of all believers being considered slaves apart from Christ but being made heirs of the Kingdom by the gospel: "So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God" (Gal 4:7). Onesimus' reception of the gospel had the effect of placing him on equal footing

with all believers who have been adopted into God's family, including the Apostle Paul himself.¹⁵² The result of this conversion dictated that how Philemon viewed Paul should also apply to how he viewed Onesimus.

V. 17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

The conditional "if" statement that Paul writes should not be taken to imply that the close relationship between Philemon and Paul was in doubt.

Daniel Wallace notes that in this and similar instances, the first conditional statement (the hypothesis – "if x") is not in doubt, but potentially the second (the conclusion – "then y").¹⁵³ The condition (x) is assumed to be true for the sake of argument or instruction. Paul's intention was to prompt Philemon to follow through on the logical result (y) of their shared love and fellowship with one another.

We may offer a paraphrase, "Since you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me."

Paul's appeal to partnership here is theologically significant as he uses a word that is no doubt familiar to many Christians. The Greek term *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*) has made its way into the modern Christian lexicon. We understand the

¹⁵² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 219.

¹⁵³ See Daniel B. Wallace, "First Class Condition (Assumed True for Argument's Sake)," in *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 694.

term to mean fellowship or life-sharing, and we know that this *κοινωνία* was foundational in the early church, and is presented as foundational for the modern church as well (Acts 2:42).

Significantly then, Paul uses the cognate term *κοινωνός* (*koinonos*) to refer to the relationship he shared with Philemon. This is far more than being a mere acquaintance or a friend at arm's length. This is sharing in the ministry of the gospel and embracing the shared duty of forgiveness and reconciliation. Philemon is encouraged to put his fellowship with the saints and his faith in Christ into action by receiving Onesimus again, not as an enemy but as a fellow participant in the gospel. He is presented with the opportunity to look Onesimus in the eye upon his return and to treat him just as he would treat Paul, welcoming him with open arms and an open heart and declaring to him in Jesus' name, "My home is your home."¹⁵⁴ That is radical reconciliation.

Philemon was not permitted to "keep his guard up" or give Onesimus the "what-for" (all things we are prone to do) but to demonstrate the character of mercy, being knit together with a fellow brother in the faith.

In light of this we are still left with the nagging question, how do these men address past wrongs? Do they simply sweep them under the rug or ignore them as if they never occurred? Paul addresses this moving forward.

¹⁵⁴ Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), 129.

Vv. 18-19 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

Paul was not blind to the facts surrounding the turmoil and hurt that had been wrought in the lives of these two men. He did not paint Onesimus as the hero but acknowledged that it was possible, maybe even likely, that Onesimus was not an exemplary human being and had sinned against Philemon just as much as Philemon had sinned against him. In fact, many commentators believe these verses indicate that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon during his escape, likely to cover his expenses.¹⁵⁵

But, limiting the wrongs that had been committed against one another to only financial harm in this instance may be too short-sighted. Broken relationships between people are rarely one-dimensional. A whole host of wounds had been inflicted in this instance – bondage, betrayal, theft, emotional pain, attacks against one another’s character, and the like.

Paul humbly assumes personal responsibility for the debts incurred, in all their forms, for the sake of Onesimus. By doing so, Paul embodies the gospel of Jesus Christ, who took responsibility for our sins and made full payment for all of the wrongs we have committed against the Father. This is the gospel made real, incarnate, lived out in real life. This is a difficult example to follow. Nevertheless, it is the way of the cross.

¹⁵⁵ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 427.

Not only is it the way of Jesus to take up the sins of others to bring about reconciliation but also to make past wrongs right – a concept best captured in the term “restitution.”

Restitution means, “The practice of making some injury or offense right with another person. Often this is accomplished through payment for the amount that was caused to be lost.”¹⁵⁶ This concept is presented to us throughout the Bible, from the Law in the OT (Ex 21:37-22:3), to the cross. It speaks to the character of God, who is a God of justice; one who doesn’t simply bring about reconciliation by ignoring the damage done but also makes wrongs right and broken relationships whole.

D.L Moody offers an illustration on restitution in his writing:

I was preaching in British Columbia some years ago and a young man came to me, and wanted to become a Christian. He had been smuggling opium into the States. “Well, my friend,” I said, “I don’t think there is any chance for you to become a Christian until you make restitution.” He said, “If I attempt to do that, I will fall into the clutches of the law, and I will go to the penitentiary.” “Well,” I replied, “you had better do that than go to the judgment-seat of God with that sin upon your soul, and have eternal punishment. The Lord will be very merciful if you set your face to do right.” He went away sorrowful, but came back the next day, and said: “I have a young wife and child, and all the furniture in my house I have bought with money I have got in this dishonest way. If I become a Christian, that furniture will have to go, and my wife

¹⁵⁶ “Make Restitution,” David Witthoff, ed., *The Lexham Cultural Ontology Glossary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

will know it.” “Better let your wife know it, and better let your home and furniture go.” “Would you come up and see my wife?” he asked; “I don’t know what she will say.” I went up to see her, and when I told her, the tears trickled down her cheeks, and she said: “Mr. Moody, I will gladly give everything if my husband can become a true Christian.” She took out her pocketbook, and handed over her last penny. No amount of weeping over sin, and saying that you feel sorry, is going to help it unless you are willing to confess and make restitution.¹⁵⁷

In this story, the man’s wife exemplifies the heart of Christ, giving all for the wrongs of her husband. In our text, Paul exemplifies the heart of Christ, taking upon himself the debts of Onesimus to make past wrongs right.

The gospel does not turn a blind eye to wrongs done. Instead, Christ bore our sins with eyes wide open and made full payment when we were penniless runaways unable to offer restitution for the grievous wounds we inflicted upon God and our fellow man.

In a clever turn of irony, Paul also reminds Philemon of how much he owed to Paul! Paul laid himself out for the gospel’s sake and reminded Philemon of how much he benefited from Paul, hoping that Philemon would realize that whatever wrongs he experienced were already more than paid for.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ D. L. Moody, *Moody’s Stories: Being a Second Volume of Anecdotes, Incidents and Illustrations* (New York; Chicago; Toronto; London; Edinburg: Fleming H. Revell, 1899), 71–72.

¹⁵⁸ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 195.

Vv. 20-21 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Paul does not mince words here. He wanted Philemon to do right by Christ and to grasp the ministry of reconciliation eagerly just as much as he had – to share in this ministry together, being convinced of Philemon’s faithfulness and obedience. The satisfactory end of this matter was what Paul was looking forward to.

Certainly, it is not without cause that Paul wrote this letter, being so plain about the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation and being so forward to instruct Philemon to fulfill this Christ-shaped responsibility. Paul’s heart could not be settled until this came to pass, but he was confident that Philemon would not shrink from the task.

So it is for us as believers, too. How we treat others, how we respond to being wronged, and how we live in fellowship with other believers in light of conflict causes our hearts to be unsettled. We so strongly desire for God’s people to live in unity with one another. And it is refreshing to our hearts when reconciliation occurs among the saints. We rejoice when people live out the gospel!

Vv. 22-24 At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark,

Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon was presented with Paul's intention in these verses. He intended to check up on Philemon and his household by paying them a personal visit. Whether or not this came to pass, we cannot say from the text alone. But Paul strongly desired to visit this dear fellow worker.

We should note here that this should not have been a fearful prospect for Philemon. Paul is convinced in his heart of hearts that Philemon will do the right thing, so this is not a threat. There is no sense of, "I'm coming to make sure you did the right thing." Rather, Paul takes some comfort in knowing that Philemon has been praying for him, and he looks forward to a glorious "family reunion" of sorts where perhaps he, Philemon, and Onesimus can sit around a table, under the same roof, as equals together. With great hope, Paul looks forward to the fruit that will be born out of this trying situation.

This is a heart of hopeful expectation, grace, and love, and this is the heart we desire to have as Christ's followers as well! As God brings about reconciliation with others in our lives, how sweet it is to see one another face to face and bask in the grace of God, the redemptive work of Christ, and the deep love we hold for one another when past wrongs are made right. It is Christ alone who is able to affect this type of total reconciliation in the lives of His people.

This reminds me of an awkward dinner party where a noted "sinner" wept at the feet of Jesus and washed His feet

with her hair, while the religious elite were scandalized by her presence. In that moment, Jesus declared, “I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47). In the midst of forgiveness, proceeding from our own sin, we truly learn how to love others greatly.

And Paul himself had participated in the ministry of reconciliation in his own life. He was no stranger to being hurt. Notice that Paul commended a man named Mark to Philemon. Mark had abandoned Paul on the mission field (Acts 15:37-40). During that time, Paul was so hurt that he decided to part ways with Mark’s relative, Barnabas, but here we see Paul and Mark serving together! In fact, in 2 Tim 4:11, Paul requested Mark by name to visit him during his second Roman imprisonment and called him “very useful for ministry.”

How did this happen? Paul embraced the gospel. He did not write people off for missteps or failings. He was convinced that the person and work of Jesus Christ are sufficient to bring about reconciliation in the lives of God’s people. In short, Paul practiced what he preached. Let our hearts be committed to the same.

Finally, in classic Pauline style, he commends the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to Philemon’s spirit. Certainly, Philemon would need this reminder as Onesimus stood at his doorstep and handed him a letter written by Paul’s own hand calling for forgiveness. Philemon would need to remember grace and would need to practice grace. So too, let us be mindful of the grace of Jesus Christ. Let us be gracious towards those who

wrong us even as we have received the grace of Christ in our own lives. Amen.

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