

THE CENTRALITY OF THE SCRIPTURE

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The proposition espoused in this paper is a simple and probably old-fashioned one. It is that the preacher should be a *specialist* in the Word of God. Although this may appear to be so obvious as to be a truism, the actual practice in many churches, even the evangelical ones, indicates a philosophy that is considerably different. The issue is not that the Scripture is denied in the churches where most of us worship, but that it is often relegated to the background while the latest fad takes the limelight. A crowd will come to see a religious film or hear a visiting choir, but the regular Sunday evening preaching service may limp along with its faithful few.

Modern life has tended to promote this sort of attitude. The pressures and complexities of the contemporary scene are spawning a society with tremendous problems. To cope with these problems, we specialize and the generalist is often downgraded. I lost my family doctor several years ago to the specialized field of radiology. The church and the ministry have not been immune to these attitudes. Today's churches are looking for trained specialists in administration, in Christian Education, in visitation, in counseling, and in music. Only occasionally does one find churches which are eager for specialists in preaching and teaching the Word of God! It is not the contention of this paper that specialization is unfortunate or unnecessary. If the various facets of an enlightened and Biblically-based church program fully complement each other, the result can be most effective and spiritually edifying. The danger is that the preaching of the Word of God may be relegated to a secondary place while the latest innovation, which may be perfectly good in itself, claims all the attention. It may actually serve to create the impression that Scripture alone is either passe or at least ineffective in itself to speak to the needs of modern man.

Often one hears the complaint that members of evangelical churches already know the Scriptures well, but that there are other elements which are seriously wrong in these churches and need immediate attention. The intimation seems to be that we have had too much doctrine, and not enough of something else. We are frequently told that too much expository and doctrinal preaching kills enthusiasm, or appeals only to the intellect, or fails to win men to Christ, or build up the

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church. Now no one with any degree of insight would deny that problems exist in the church, as they have since the early days at Jerusalem. At the same time, those who have been involved in testing the Biblical knowledge of young people from evangelical churches who enter colleges and seminaries are not terribly impressed with the level of Scripture knowledge possessed by them. The recent studies by Zuck and Getz have also pointed this out graphically.¹

In this paper I propose to look at the church of Ephesus as reflected in the First Epistle to Timothy. It was a church with serious problems, three of which shall form the focus of this study. Some at Ephesus were confused over the issue of *legalism*. These were doubtless people with a strong sense of duty, who could not be content unless they forced the same code of conduct upon others. There were some at Ephesus for whom *asceticism* posed real problems. These were the folk whose austerity of life soon resulted in a "holier than thou" attitude, and issued doubtless in a critical spirit toward those who did not share their views. Still others were affected by a spirit of *materialism*. They were more interested in the "here and now," especially in the physical benefits which money could provide, than in the spiritual values that have eternal reward.

In looking carefully at these three problems, ones which are by no means unknown in *our* churches, we should note carefully Paul's way of handling them. The thesis of this paper is that the church through its ministry is to solve its problems by a thorough application of the Word of God in every case. When problems arise in the church, it is because we have failed to bring them into harmony with the Word of God as revealed in Scripture.

I. LEGALISM (I Timothy 1:3-17)

The very first issue taken up by Paul in I Timothy was the matter of legalism. In chapter 1 he sketched the *problem*, asserted his *proposition*, and then presented the *proof* that Biblical truth when rightly employed was the answer to the problem in Ephesus, and of course in every other place as well.

The *problem* is sketched in I Timothy 1:3-7. What had happened at Ephesus was the dissemination of wrong doctrine about man's relation to the law of God as revealed through Moses. The wrong men had come in. They are mentioned rather slightly as "some" in 1:3, and are called "law teachers" in 1:7. Apparently they were self-styled experts in the Mosaic Law who were intent upon enforcing certain aspects of Judaism upon this largely gentile church.

Because they were really ignorant of the significance of these issues in spite of their confident manner of speaking, the result was wrong

1. Roy B. Zuck, and Gene A. Getz, *Christian Youth, an In-Depth Study* (Chicago, 1968).

doctrine which Paul regarded as disastrous. He labelled their efforts as "different doctrine" in 1:3, as "myths and endless genealogies which raise questions" in 1:4, and as "useless talk" in 1:6. The same word *muthos* (myths) is used in Titus 1:14 with the adjective *Ioudaikois* (Jewish), and thus we should probably understand that the myths here in view were Jewish in nature. The various Talmudic legends are illustrations of this sort of thing. Although attempts have been made to explain these "endless genealogies" as Gnostic speculations, the efforts have not been conclusive, and in this context it is much better to regard them as referring to the Old Testament lists of genealogies which were often amplified with tales invented about them. These may have been more interesting to gentile hearers than those long lists of Jewish ancestors. But inasmuch as all such manipulations were but human inventions, there could be no spiritual edification forthcoming. One cannot help wondering if the excesses of some Christian typologists in treating the Old Testament are not another form of the same problem. All that resulted was argumentation. Paul called the whole business useless talk. Human traditions were being placed on a par with Scripture, and Scripture itself was being forced into a use which was contrary to God's intention.

Paul's *proposition* is given in 1:8-11. He argues first of all that the Mosaic Law is essentially good. His Christian conscience agreed with its high standard. It was a law that God had given. Surely it had retarded many evils. Christ came not to "destroy the law but to fulfil it." Elsewhere Paul argues that the law had a good purpose—to prepare men for Christ (Gal. 3:24).

But he declares most forcibly that the law was not intended for enforcement upon Christians. Although absence of the article in verse 9 from both "law" and "righteous man" could indicate the general principle that laws are not enacted because men are righteous but because they are not, the article is present with "law" in verse 8, and the mention of the lawbreakers in verse 9 follows quite closely the order of the Ten Commandments. Hence it is likely that "law" is being used in the same sense in verse 9, and that "righteous man" should be understood in the usual Pauline sense of one who is in Christ, possessed of justification, and thus a true Christian.

Hence Paul is understood to say that the Mosaic Law is improperly used if it is imposed upon Christians. This does not mean that the law had no value at all. There was a "lawful" use, as we infer from verse 8. That use was to regard it as an expression of God's standard of righteousness. For the man who refuses Christ and wants to be judged on his own merits, the law sets forth the kind of standard by which God operates. The law establishes guilt, and thus is a logical preface to the gospel. Hence Paul says it is "for the ungodly and for sinners" (vs. 9), to be used "in accordance with the glorious gospel" (vs. 11).

The Mosaic Law was not intended to save sinners, but to display God's standard and thus reveal man's need. The law was powerless to put within a man a new heart that could keep it. Nor was the Mosaic Law given to make Christians more holy, for believers have died in Christ to the law's demands. It is the message of the grace of God in the gospel that must be presented to condemned men if they are to be made right with God.

How do we know that the grace of God can transform a man apart from obligation to the Mosaic Law? Paul submits himself in 1:12-17 as the great *proof* that grace, not law, is what saves and keeps. In 1:13 he describes his pre-conversion days when he was a dedicated adherent of the Mosaic Law. In spite of his undisputed fervor, and his blamelessness so far as the externals of the Mosaic Code were concerned (Phil. 3:6), none of this prevented him from being a blasphemer of the Son of God, a persecutor of the church, and an outrageous man in the eyes of God and God's people. It was the grace and mercy of God, displayed to him in Christ that made the difference. Not only did this result in Paul's own salvation, but it provided a pattern to others of how God proposes to save sinners.

In Ephesus, just as in all the centuries before and since, human hearts were shrinking from accepting the grace of God. Men have always preferred to "do their own thing," under the mistaken notion that their own efforts can contribute something meaningful to God. Paul's answer to the problem was to insist upon the lawful usage of the Word of God (1:8). What he called for was the clear and forthright proclamation of the truth of God, handled in the proper way. The quotation of a few Scriptural mottoes here and there would not be sufficient to refute these Judaizing foes. Solid Biblical preaching, backed by the clear understanding of the theological issues involved, was the only proper antidote.

II. ASCETICISM (I Timothy 4:1-5)

The second attitude at Ephesus which needed correction was an ascetic one which equated sin with sensual appetites and held that sanctification came only if those appetites were denied. Paul discussed this in I Timothy 4:1-5. This philosophy was predicted by the Spirit as being a characteristic of the latter times, and in harmony with other apostolic writers Paul regarded the latter times as already present.² In his delineation of this problem Paul described the *persons* involved, the *teaching* they espoused, and prescribed the only real *antidote*. This problem has been a recurring one throughout church history, with instances varying from the obvious practices of forced celibacy and vegetarianism to more subtle taboos which confuse the untutored and obscure the truth about the real nature of sin.

2. Peter (Acts 2:16, 17), John (I John 2:18).

The *persons* involved were of three types. There were the unfortunate victims, described as "some" who would depart from the faith. These were persons who once had been part of the Christian society but had been hoodwinked by false doctrine. They were not sufficiently grounded in the truth of God's Word to distinguish it from error. They were like the seed on the rocky ledge that soon withered away.

The source of this false teaching was evil spirits and demons. James spoke in similar fashion about a wisdom that is "earthly, sensual, demonic" (James 3:15). That Satanic power can get hold of men's minds is nothing new. The cases of Peter (Matt. 16:23), Judas (John 13:2, 27), false prophets (I John 4:1-6), and Antichrist (II Thess. 2:9) are familiar New Testament examples.

There is a third party mentioned in Paul's description, a fact obscured by the KJV rendering of *pseudologon* as a participle used adjectivally of the demons as "speaking lies" in hypocrisy while having a seared conscience. Since Scripture does not attribute conscience to demons elsewhere, it seems preferable to regard *pseudologon* as a substantive, "lie speakers," and to understand it as referring to the human agents who are motivated by demonic influence and tell their lies in hypocrisy, masquerading as purveyors of Christian truth. With these human teachers, the standard of truth has been so perverted that their conscience does not even condemn them. It is as dead as flesh after the cauterizing iron has been applied.

The ascetic *teaching* which they promoted involved two areas chiefly. It prohibited marriage and certain foods. Satan has always contradicted and attempted to thwart the purposes of God. Today we see marriage under attack in society at large in the modern notions of New Morality and Situational Ethics. Those of a deeply religious bent, even including Christian groups, often are susceptible to this perversion that the unmarried state is more holy. Historical examples include the Essenes in Judaism, as well as Gnostics early in the Christian era, and a celibate priesthood in later centuries. The rejection of various foods has also had a long history; yet it too is based on the false concept that man's physical body is inherently evil. The Levitical injunctions against certain foods were ceremonial, not spiritual distinctions. Jesus said, "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man, but that which cometh out of the mouth" (Matt. 15:11). "That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of man, proceed evil thoughts. . . ." (Mark 7:20, 21)

To reject wholesome foods or marriage on religious grounds is a disrespect of God. Paul said it was demonic. Fasting and a single life may be appropriate on certain occasions, but not because sex and food are wrong. Scripture is absolutely clear on this point.

The *antidote* Paul gave was a devastating answer to this subtle but

demonic teaching. By basing his argument squarely upon the Word of God, he undercut the very foundations of ascetic teaching, and charted the course which when followed carefully still provides the best answer to this recurring problem.

First, Paul said that these privileges of marriage and foods which were being challenged were created by God to be received (I Tim. 4:3). A careful reading of the Scripture reveals that marriage was instituted in Eden, and foods—both vegetable and animal—were authorized by God himself (Gen. 1:29; 2:16; 9:3). Man's physical body was the creation of God, as well as the foods which sustain it and the institution of marriage which propagates it. These privileges are to be accepted and utilized in the way God intended. To view them as suspect controverts the purpose of God.

Second, these challenged privileges were intended for saved people, for those "who believe and know the truth." They were given to Adam in his unfallen state. Thus it is not correct to infer that they are concessions to fallen men, but that God's higher purpose desires abstention. This statement, of course, does not mean that unsaved men should not marry nor have free access to wholesome foods, but it does mean that these items are certainly allowable to believers.

Third, these privileges are intrinsically good. "Every created thing of God is good and is not to be cast away" (4:4). Moses recorded this after describing the days of creation (Gen. 1:12, etc.). Christ reiterated the truth that food cannot defile (Mark 7:15). Even the Old Testament distinctions between ceremonially clean and unclean animals, which were useful until Christ, are now finished (Acts 10:15). The marriage relation was instituted by God, and its holy character was restated on more than one occasion by Christ's teaching dealing with adultery and divorce. To argue that marriage or eating is a moral or spiritual flaw is calling something evil which God has pronounced good.

Fourth, these privileges are safeguarded against abuse through the use of the Word of God and prayer. It is possible for marriage to be perverted by adultery and uncontrolled lust, and eating to be abused by gluttony. The believer has two aids to guide him. One is the objective instruction provided by the Word of God which sets forth the proper use of these privileges. By this means they are "sanctified" or set apart to their rightful use. The other aid is the petitionary prayer of the believer whereby he asks for discernment and spiritual strength to use his privileges in accordance with God's Word.

Although Paul might well have discussed the attendant evils of asceticism and the harmful results that almost always occur, he chose instead to deal with the issue at its very source by showing how the ascetic is in opposition to the Word of God. In his view a careful grounding of the believers in the Scripture was the best safeguard against this dangerous philosophy.

III. MATERIALISM (I Timothy 6:3-19)

The third of the wrong attitudes which was causing problems in the church at Ephesus was *materialism*. Paul deals with this in I Timothy 6:3-19. It was an attitude which affected both pastor and people. No Christian is immune to the materialistic concerns of his society which so easily turn people aside from spiritual goals to temporal ones. As a good medical doctor (can Luke's influence be reflected here?), Paul notes the *symptoms* (6:3), gives a *diagnosis* of the problem (6:4, 5), makes a *prognosis* that will be inevitable unless remedial steps are taken (6:9, 10), and then gives his *prescription* to cure the difficulty (6:6-8, 11-19).

The *symptoms* of this problem as observable in Christian leaders are the teaching of doctrine different from the Word of God and an attitude toward godly living that is inconsistent with the teaching of Christ (6:3). Whenever a Christian leader, entrusted with the responsibility of conveying Christian truth and apparently devoted by personal commitment to the pursuit of this task, begins to deviate from the Word of God either in his message or by his manner of life, it is symptomatic of a deeper problem.

Paul's *diagnosis* was that the real disease was pride and a desire for material gain (6:4, 5). The promulgation of different doctrine was really an attempt to exalt one's self. The constant bickering which this engendered served no constructive purpose, but ministered only to the ego of the innovator. According to Paul it provided the perpetrator with a source of material gain. He supposed that "godliness is a way of gain," and he used his doctrinal innovations to gain a following which in turn would bring him material advantage.

The *prognosis* for such a disease is dismal indeed (6:9, 10). Verse 9 describes those who may be poor, but whose deliberate intention is to acquire wealth. An inordinate interest in material acquisitions is spiritually disruptive for any Christian, and absolutely disastrous for Christian leaders. It leads on a downward course. Setting one's aim rigidly on material wealth leads inevitably to temptations to questionable ethics or outright dishonesty, not all of which will be resisted. Proceeding down this road is virtually certain to stimulate other unspiritual desires, and the end result is personal disaster. This unhappy situation frequently causes loss of interest in spiritual things to the extent that some may actually abandon the faith they once espoused, and inflict upon themselves countless troubles they might have otherwise avoided. As Paul put it, "Money love is productive of all kinds of evils." It is not the possession of wealth that is denounced, for wealth itself can provide much that is good. It is money-love that holds the danger.

But we must note Paul's *prescription* against the woes of materialism. It is summarized in the exhortation of 6:14, "Keep the commandment." Nothing in the passage limits the identification of this "commandment," and it is best therefore to regard it as the totality of the obligations resting upon believers from the Word of God. Jesus said,

"Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14), and authorized the apostles to instruct their converts by "teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Hence Timothy is to heed personally what the Word of God teaches about materialism, and to instruct others likewise.

In particular Paul reminds us from the Scripture that believers need to cultivate contentment (6:6-8). His statement in 6:7, "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out," may well be indebted to Job 1:21, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither." Since we shall leave this life precisely as we entered it—with no material possessions—the few things that are actually needed during our brief span on earth should not unduly disturb God's people.

Second, the believer who would avoid the ravages of materialism should flee from those contagious situations where the disease may be contracted and must pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and meekness. He must be aware that the Christian life is not without its foes, and that he must "contend" if he is to conquer. He must lay hold on the eternal life which he has received from Christ and live in the light of all its implications. The mention of "faith" is again a reminder of the believer's continuing need to know the Word of God and trust it for the needs of life.

The third part of Paul's prescription is addressed to those who are already legitimately rich in material wealth (6:17-19). The need was to emphasize spiritual goals. This may be a special problem for the rich, but it is by no means restricted to them. All men, whether rich or poor, must resist the allurements of material advantage in order to lay up heavenly treasure. He says to them that they need to regard their riches properly. Wealth should not cause them to be exalted in mind as though God was more pleased with them than with the poor. They should make sure that they are still trusting God, not their riches. They should regard their wealth as a stewardship, not an absolute possession. Only if they are willing to share their goods to bless others can they really be sure that they are free from the taint of an evil materialism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it must be observed that Paul's assessment of the difficulties in the church is still a legitimate and most perceptive one. Not only so, but his prescription remains just as sound as his diagnosis. The Word of God is still what the Christian minister is called to proclaim. Other specialties may be called upon to aid, to clarify, or to illuminate, but it is the Word of God in its entirety, understood by the most diligent of scholarly study, and empowered by the Spirit of God, which holds the final solution for man and his needs. In our positions as members of the evangelical academic community, may we always, as Timothy once was urged to do, "keep the commandment without spot, unrebukeable until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14).