

Entrusted with the Gospel:
 Studies in 2 Timothy, #4
 Nov. 26, 2017

"Correctly Handling the Truth"

2 Tim. 2:14-26

--CEFC 11/26/17; 6/9/91

When I marry a couple, I insist that we first engage in pre-marital counseling,
 and one of the primary purposes of that counseling
 is to dispel any naïve romantic conceptions about marriage.
 You see, they always love each other—these couples--
 and sometimes, overcome by cupid's spell,
 they can't imagine ever having any conflicts or struggles in their marriage.
 They are "in love"—that's all they need, isn't it?
 My job is to help them get real,
 and to recognize that marriage is much more than romance,
 and living in harmony over the long haul
 is harder than they might think./

I think the same thing could be said about life in the church.
 I get nervous when people come with some rosy-eyed view of church life
 in which they assume that, since we are Christians,
 we will all just love one another
 without the slightest hint of conflict or dispute.
 I am afraid they may be in for a rude awakening.

Unity within a church, as within a marriage—it takes work.

It is not without reason that the Apostle Paul says an awful lot
 about seeking unity in the local church.

I think of Eph. 4, for example:

**"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit
 through the bond of peace"** (vv. 2,3).

Or in Phil. 2--

**"make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love,
 being one in spirit and purpose.
 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit,
 but in humility consider others better than yourselves"** (vv. 2,3).

Later in that letter he makes a very personal appeal:

**"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche
 to agree with each other in the Lord"
 These are women who had "contended at [Paul's] side
in the cause of the gospel" (vv. 2,3),
 and yet were finding it hard to get along.**

And in every case, Paul grounds this call to grace-filled relationships with one another

in the truth of the gospel message.

To the Philippians he says,

"your attitude should be the same as that which is in Christ Jesus" (2:5).

And to the Ephesians, he had written,

"live a life of love just as Christ loved us

and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5:2).

The grace that builds unity in the church

is grounded in the truth of the gospel message.

And building a community of grace and truth,

a community united in the gospel of Jesus Christ,

living in loving harmony with one another—

that is not an easy task.

And it never has been, as Paul's frequent admonitions certain imply.

And one source of disharmony in the church

is a direct result of false teaching about the gospel

and what that gospel entails in terms of Christian living.

Just think of the church in Corinth--

Paul writes,

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you,

and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans:

A man has his father's wife. And you are proud [of it]!" (5:1,2).

They had failed to grasp the truth that in the gospel

God calls us to holiness.

To the church of Galatia Paul writes in passionate tones

against those who had infiltrated the church

and began teaching things that were perverting

the pure gospel of grace.

They were separating from other Christians,

and Paul says they were not **"acting in line with the truth of the gospel"** (2:14).

The gospel breaks down the social and cultural barriers that divide us.

In John's first letter he warns against those who were a part of the church

yet were denying the central doctrine of the faith

that Jesus Christ was the Son of God come in the flesh.

The unity of this church was broken by a fundamental disunity

about what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about—

God himself entering our world in his Son, taking on our humanity to save us./

The fact is, heretical teaching is not new--

from the very beginning the church has had to battle for the truth--

look at the passage that was just read--2 Tim. 2:14-26--
Three times Paul speaks about the truth--

in v.15 he urges Timothy to be a workman
who correctly handles the word of truth.
in v.17 he speaks of Hymanaeus and Philetus,
who have wandered away from the truth.
in v.25 he urges Timothy to instruct those who oppose him
in the hope that God might lead them to a knowledge of the truth.

We believe that this message that was revealed by God,
this message that was confirmed by the ministry of Jesus,
this message that was taught by the apostles is the truth.

If it is not, then we might as well sleep in on Sunday mornings
and enjoy a nice brunch.

The church of Jesus Christ claims to proclaim the truth--
the truth about God and the truth about how God calls us to live--
and the church has always been engaged in a battle for that truth,
even within its own ranks.

And this battle is what dominates the central portion
of Paul's second letter to Timothy--
beginning in 2:14 and continuing all the way through v.5 of chap. 4.

In our passage this morning we want to look first
at a description of the opponents of the truth,
in the brief references Paul gives to them,
then consider the dangers they pose to the church,
before looking at the response Paul urges in his counsel to Timothy.¹

This is an important lesson if we here at Cornerstone
want to build a community united in grace and truth.

I. First, a Description of Dissension—

What did the contentious controversies in this church in Ephesus look like?

The opposition begins with a pointless and trivial dispute--
v.14-- "**Warn them before God against quarreling about words;
it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.**"

"**quarreling about words**"—literally, the expression here is a "word battle"
and in Paul's mind, as he says in v. 16,

¹ For this basic outline and a number of helpful insights on this passage, I am indebted to Roy Clements, sermon on this passage at Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge, England, 1984?

it is nothing but godless chatter--empty talk.

Now Paul was no stranger to theological debate--
and in such debate the meaning of words is important.

But here he seems to be referring to what he calls in 1 Tim. 6:4
"an **unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments**
that results in envy, quarreling, malicious talk, evil suspicions
and constant friction between men of corrupt mind."

He is saying that godly believers don't quarrel about minor matters or trivial things.
I've seen it--

They'll talk for hours about esoteric theological topics--
They'll argue over the smallest matters
and become stubbornly entrenched in their position—
whether it be what color the carpet ought to be
or what is the best English translation of the Bible.
They argue over what are, at best, secondary issues.
And in the process they lose sight of what really counts--
they have no concern for the seriousness of truth.
They are not interested in submitting to the truth--
they just toy with it.
It all just becomes a game--
a way to score points against your sparring partner.

It is pointless and trivial--

"**Warn them before God against quarreling about words;**" Paul says,
"it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen."

The second way Paul describes this dissension

is that it is uninformed--
v.23--he calls them "**foolish and stupid arguments**"

The words Paul uses here suggest that these opponents
are untaught or untrained people—

As Paul described them in his first letter to Timothy:

"**They want to be teachers of the law,**
but they do not know what they are talking about
or what they so confidently affirm" (1 Tim. 1:7).

And their arguments are uninformed speculations that breed disputes
instead of bringing unity.

I think the central idea here is a departure
from what has been revealed in Scripture,
and has been affirmed by believers through the history of the church.

Their minds have not been trained and disciplined by God's truth
so they go off into all sorts of human speculations.

In 1 Tim. 1:4 Paul speaks of those who devote themselves
to myths and endless genealogies which promote controversy
rather than God's work.

In this realm of speculation one person's opinion is as good as another's--
there is no agreed authority or final court of appeal.

It is "**foolish and stupid**" as far as Paul is concerned,
certainly these speculations should be seen to be what they are
and are not worth fighting about.

And finally Paul describes this dissension in the church
as a contradiction of revealed truth--
Paul sees this as so serious that he refers to the perpetrators by name--
vv. 17,18-- Hymenaeus and Philetus have wandered away from the truth
by saying that the resurrection has already taken place.

Perhaps Hymenaeus and Philetus were just trying to be relevant.
After all, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body
was certainly not popular in Greco-Roman culture--
Paul preached the resurrection in Athens, and they laughed at him.

Religion, in their view, was purely a spiritual, mystical experience--
but the resurrection of the body anchored Christian revelation
in real history--flesh and blood history.
Jesus died and was really raised from the dead--
not just as an immortal soul but as a re-created person.
The tomb was empty.

And that same Jesus will return in real history,
and the God of creation will redeem his fallen creation
and re-create us also to be like Christ.
And the final goal, the ultimate end point in God's saving purpose,
is not an ephemeral experience in the heavenly clouds
playing harps,
but a new heaven and a new earth
in which God dwells with his people.
That is our great hope.

The doctrine of the resurrection means that our bodies matter--
what we do with our bodies matter--
as in the exercise of our sexuality.
God has created us bodily to function in a certain way.

And the doctrine of the resurrection means that we have a future hope--
God is not finished with us yet--
we are still enmeshed in a mortal body of sin.
Only when Christ returns will we be set free forever.

Evidently, Hymenaeus and Philetus didn't get that—
and in Paul's mind, that was no small matter.

From idle talk, to contentious speculation, to outright heresy--
that's the pattern we see in Paul's day,
and we see it today, as well.

Seeking to be in step with the culture,
people can get out of step with the truth.
And this can have devastating consequences--
Which leads us to our next point--

II. As we move from a description of this dissension
to its dangers.

Paul mentions three--

1. First, it undermines faith--
v.18--"They destroy the faith of some."

For these people, all this theological jabbering is just a game,
but they forget that their sport
can result in serious injuries,
and, to change the metaphor, it can shipwreck the faith of others.

Their speculations do not edify;
they destroy.

And it is a sobering thought to consider
that the Lord will hold them responsible for their acts--

Jesus said, "If anyone cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,
**it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck
and to be drowned in the depths of the sea**" (Mt. 18:6).

I take very seriously James's statement that "**not many should presume to be teachers
because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly**" (3:1).

I try to be very careful in my teaching—
I dare not destroy the faith of those I teach.

2. Second, this dissension undermines unity--

v. 23--these foolish and stupid arguments "**produce quarrels**."
Unfortunately this is very true—
when someone deviates from the apostolic teaching
there is bound to be pushback.

Aren't we seeing that very thing in the churches that have embraced
the new sexual ethic of our age.
Congregations and whole denominations are breaking apart—

I think of our brothers and sisters in the Falls Church Anglican,
 who lost all their property by standing for the truth.
 Quarrels, indeed!

3. And third, such dissension undermines morality--

v.16--those who indulge in this godless chatter
 become more and more ungodly.

Literally, Paul says
 they "advance," they "progress" into more and more ungodliness.

These opponent may have seen themselves as the avant-garde,
 on the cutting edge,
 the progressives, leading the church forward.
 But Paul sees them moving in the opposite direction.

In his first letter Paul spells out this connection—

**"We also know that the law is made not for the righteous
 but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful,
 the unholy and irreligious,
 for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers,
 for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality,
 for slave traders and liars and perjurers—
 and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine
 that conforms to the gospel
 concerning the glory of the blessed God,
 which he entrusted to me" (1 Tim. 1:9-11).**

In Paul's mind, "**the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel**"
 includes the call to godly living
 and necessarily excludes things like sexual immorality
 and homosexual acts and slave trading and lying and perjury.
 All these are heresies according to Paul.
 False teaching leads to ungodly living.

And who can doubt the same thing is happening today.

You see, what we believe is true matters.
 Our convictions control our conduct;
 What we think determines how we live.

And when we throw off the anchor of God's truth,
 we will be left adrift,
 blown this way and that by the winds of our culture.

Once truth is no longer taken seriously
 we can do whatever we want--
 and we can justify whatever we do.

There is no standard by which we will be judged,
no rule by which our acts must be measured.

In the first chapter, Paul had urged Timothy:

**"What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching,
with faith and love in Christ Jesus.**

**Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—
guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (1:13-14).**

Now Timothy must deal with those who were deviating from that deposit
and either adding to it
or subtracting from it.

But that kind of teaching undermines the faith of the church;
it undermines the unity of the church;
it undermines the holiness of the church.

It "ruins those who listen" Paul says in v.14--

Paul uses the word from which we get our word "catastrophic."

Unlike the "sound doctrine" that promotes spiritual well-being,
their teaching is like a plague that spreads like gangrene—
producing rot to the members of the body.

Like a cancer, it draws in unsuspecting followers,
who become infected with what looks attractive,
but which is toxic to the health of the church.

What is Paul's response to all this?
What does he do?

He can't go to Ephesus to address the situation personally--
his Roman jailer would hardly parole him for that purpose.

He could write the church a letter, but he's done that before,
and besides, the time for letters of apostolic instruction
is soon to be gone.
Paul knows his days are numbered.

No, Paul's response to this dissension in the church is Timothy himself.

Look at the opening verses of 1 Timothy--

v.3--"**As I urged you when I went into Macedonia,
stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men
not to teach false doctrines any longer. . . ."**

Paul's strategy is to send a pastor, a Bible teacher--
this is the long term answer the perennial problem
of heresy and division in the church.

And in every generation God needs Timothys--

pastors, elders, church leaders who know the truth,
who will be faithful to the truth,
and who will stand up to those who oppose the truth.

We saw last week that Paul used three metaphors
to picture the Christian life--
the pictures of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer.

Now he uses three more to depict the role of the Christian leader--

First, there is the **Approved Workman**--

v.15--"**Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved,
a workman who does not need not be ashamed
and who correctly handles the word of truth.**"

How does this approved workman work?

First, he works faithfully--

v.14--"**Keep reminding them of these things**"--
"**these things**" are the truths of the gospel in vv. 8,9--
Jesus Christ raised from the dead, descended from David.
This gospel which demands our all.

The workman must be faithful to this enduring message--
he doesn't need gimmicks or novelty--

He must be faithful to the truth once and for all given to the saints.
You should be suspicious of any preacher
who gives you something new every week.
You don't need what is new;
you need what is true.

As one preacher put it,
"Reminding people [of the truth they already know]
is 95% of what sermons are for."²

God's workman must be faithful to that task if he is to be approved by God.

Second, God's workman must work responsibly--
"**Present yourself to God as one approved;**"
warn them "**before God**" against quarreling.

The workman knows the One to whom he is accountable--
he is not, first of all, an employee of the church (apart from some tax purposes);
he is accountable to God.

His goal is not to keep everyone in his congregation happy--
but to satisfy his Lord.

²Roy Clements, sermon on this text

His desire is to be approved by him.

Third, the approved workman is to work skillfully--
"correctly handling the word of truth."

Literally, he is to "cut the word in a straight line."³
 This is a verb used in the Greek Old Testament
 of cutting a straight path through the wilderness.

The skillful workman cuts a straight path as he teaches the word--
 He focuses on the main point,
 he avoids pitfalls,
 he refuses to be side-tracked into needless arguments about secondary issues.
 He **"correctly handles the word of truth."**

This is crucial, for the Bible can be misused;
 its message can be perverted.
 Think of how the devil tried to twist the Scripture
 in his temptations of Jesus.

The approved workman must be faithful, responsible, and skillful
 as he teaches the divine message of truth,
 so that he will not be ashamed when his craftsmanship is inspected.

B. The second metaphor Paul uses here is that of the Cleansed Vessel--
 vv.20.21--

**"In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver,
 but also of wood and clay;
 some are for noble [or honorable] purposes
 and some for ignoble [or dishonorable]."**

Some dishes and utensils in a great house or stately mansion
 are used only in the kitchen--the pots and pans and common bowls,
 or as receptacles for garbage and filth--
 they may even be thrown out
 when disposing of what they contain.

Others are taken out to be used when the guests arrive--
 the fine china, the silver goblets, and golden salt and pepper shakers.

All of these vessels can be used, but they are used in two different ways--
 Paul calls them the noble and ignoble,
 honorable and dishonorable.

God can use us in two ways, too--
 God can use us as we willingly make ourselves available for his use--

³ Prov. 3:6; 11:5.

as we seek him and purify our hearts for his purposes.
But God is sovereign--
and the truth is, he can use us to accomplish his purposes
even without our conscious cooperation--
Just as he used the hardened heart of Pharaoh
to bring glory to himself
in the Exodus of Israel from the bondage of slavery.
or just as he used Cyrus, the pagan ruler of the Persians,
to conquer the Babylonians and to bring the Israelites back from Exile,
or just as he used the treacherous Judas, who betrayed Jesus,
to bring about the redemption of the world.

God can use you even if you are unwilling,
but there's no honor in that kind of use.
God wants willing hearts,
he wants pure vessels to use to do his work

v. 21--"If a man cleanses himself,
**he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy,
useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."**

Be a pure vessel, Timothy.

So he says in v. 22--"**Flee the evil desires of youth**"--
selfish ambition,
headstrong pride,
quick temper,
and sexual lust--
Flee from these things.

It's interesting that Paul had just encouraged Timothy to stand firm as a good soldier
and courageously face even martyrdom if need be.
But when it comes to the temptations of sin,
he is to run away like a coward.

It's called "Nike theology"—
Nike means "victory"—
When you see sin coming
put on your Nike running shoes and run away!
That bold retreat is the key to victory.

This is good advice--
"Let him who stands beware, lest he fall."
Beware of compromising situations--
beware of morally dangerous situations with the opposite sex,
beware of the what you look at on TV or on the internet;
beware of alcohol that clouds your judgment,
beware of stimulating greed and covetousness
as you stroll through the mall.

"Flee" Paul says.

But more than that--"Pursue," he says--

"Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace"

Holiness is not just a matter of "Thou shalt not's"

but also a positive pursuit of holiness.

"Train yourself to be godly," Paul had said in his first letter to Timothy,

"For physical training is of some value,

but godliness has value for all things,

holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

"Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace."

"Pursue these in good company--

"along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

We need the encouragement of other believers

as we seek to set our minds on the things that please our Lord--

"whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right,

whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--"

we must set our minds on these things.

I want you to know that our pastors and elders

are taking this seriously—

We are reading together the very helpful book

The Pursuit of Holiness by Jerry Bridges,

and we are developing accountability relationships among ourselves

to encourage each other to flee from sin and to pursue righteousness—

We want to be vessel used for noble purposes,

"made holy, useful to the Master

and prepared to do any good work."

Do you want to be useful to the Master?

Do you want your life to be used for noble purposes?

Then you must seek to be a pure vessel.

A Skillful Workman

A Pure Vessel--

And then there is a final metaphor--

Paul gives us the picture of the **Gentle Servant**--

here he describes the attitude that the Christian leader should have

when he comes into face-to-face confrontation with those who oppose him.

v. 24f.--"And the Lord's servant must not quarrel;

instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

He must gently instruct those who oppose him . . ."

One might have expected something different here--

this sounds rather tame and timid--
not at all the forceful affirmation of a soldier of Christ
contending for the truth of the gospel.

Don't quarrel, but be kind--
don't be resentful, but instruct gently--
that last word means with humility, courtesy, civility, and meekness.

There is nothing here about compromising the truth.
Not at all--the consequences are too important for that.
In fact, Paul urges Timothy to confront and to warn before God
those who oppose him.

But it is to be done gently, not arrogantly or harshly.
It is to be done in light of the example of Christ--
for that gentleness of which Paul speaks
was especially characteristic of Jesus--
"Learn from me," Jesus said,
"for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Mt. 11:29).

Jesus is the Servant par excellence--
as described in Isa. 42 which was applied to Jesus in the gospels,
He was the one who did not quarrel or cry out--
he was sensitive to all in need--
to those who felt battered or burned out--
"a bruised reed he will not break
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,"
Isaiah says of him.

This must be the quality of those who would speak for him--
this "**meekness and gentleness of Christ**" (2 Cor. 10:1).

For our confrontation must come from a heart of compassion--
understanding those who oppose the truth as Paul does in v. 26--
as those ensnared in a diabolic trap--
held captive in lies by the Father of lies.

Ultimately, it won't be the force of our argument
that sets them straight.

Our hope as Paul puts it
is "**that God will grant them repentance
leading them to a knowledge of the truth.**"

You see, this is God's truth--
He stands behind it--
for it is the truth that he built into creation itself.
It is the truth that has been revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
It is the truth that will one day be revealed
in a way that will be obvious to all.

Heretics like Hymenaeus and Philetus may destroy the faith of some,

but Paul is not worried that somehow
the truth will disappear;
that it will overcome by falsehood.
that the heretics will overrule the faithful.
It can't happen.

Look at v. 19--Some may fall away,
"Nevertheless," Paul says, "God's solid foundation stands firm"—
It is a secure structure,
nothing can topple it--
it has a seal, a seal of ownership, on it--
and here Paul quotes from the Book of Numbers, chap. 16--
a story in which Korah the Levite challenged Moses' authority in Israel.
Korah gathered a group to oppose Moses--
saying that their opinions about divine matters
were every bit as valid as Moses'.
"Do you think you're the only one who is holy in Israel?" they said.

Moses went before the Lord,
and then he turned to Korah and said,
"In the morning the Lord will show who belongs to him."
And then he called on the Israelites to separate themselves from Korah.

And the rest, as they say, is history--
in the morning, the ground split apart
and swallowed up Korah and all those who stood with him.
Yes, "The Lord knows those who are his,"
and the Lord will also show who are his (Num. 16:5).
God's solid foundation stands firm—
you can be sure of it.
God's truth will win out in the end. /

It's a big task Paul has given to Timothy--
and to us-- to preserve the truth,
and to live in the light of the truth.

It's an overwhelming task, in fact,
when you consider the forces seeking to undermine and destroy that truth.

But there is no reason to fear,
or to feel threatened
or to respond to opposition with spiteful anger or malice--
The Lord is big enough to take care of himself--
God will vindicate his truth.

God's solid foundation stands firm,
sealed with this inscription:
"The Lord knows those who are his,"

What is our responsibility?

**"Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord
must run away from wickedness."**

Where do you stand--

on God's solid foundation?
on the truth of his word?
as a approved workman correctly handling it
as a pure vessel fit for his use
as a Christ-like servant gently correcting those in error?

Or do you stand with Hymanaeus and Philetus

who have wandered from the truth?
and with Korah who rebelled against the truth?

I remind you again this morning,

if we are to build a community of grace,
we must build our community on truth—
we must hold fast to the good deposit—
the pattern of sound teaching we have received—
with faith and love in Christ Jesus.

We must look to the gospel of Jesus Christ
given to us in the holy Scriptures,
with the help of the Holy Spirit who live in us
and so live in the love we have received in Christ.

Prayer--

Closing Song: *Let it be said of us*

Benediction:

Now may the God of truth sanctify us in his truth
by the power of the Spirit of truth
in the name of the one who is the truth.
Amen.

Entrusted with the Gospel:
Studies in 2 Timothy, #4
Nov. 26, 2017

"Unity Through Truth" 2 Tim. 2:14-26

We speak of "building a community of grace and truth," and our passage this morning remind us that these two must go together. We must guard the truth if we are to become a gracious community displaying the character of Christ. In our passage this morning Paul urges Timothy to respond to those who are causing dissension in the church.

I. A Description of Dissension

- A. Trivial Quarrels**
- B. Uninformed Disputes**
- C. Heretical Teaching**

II. The Dangers of Dissension

- A. It Undermines Faith**
- B. It Undermines Unity**
- C. It Undermines Morality**

III. The Response to Dissension

- A. The Approved Workman**
- B. The Cleansed Vessel**
- C. The Gentle Servant**

Discussion Questions:

"Correctly Handling the Truth"

2 Tim. 2:14-26

- What has been your experience with dissension and conflict within a church? What were some of its causes? Why is preserving unity in a church difficult?
- Why is truth so important in preserving unity in a church? How do grace and truth go together to create a loving community?
- What is the connection Paul makes between false teaching and ungodly living?
- What do you need to "flee" from if you are to pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace?
- What does your pursuit of "righteousness, faith, love and peace" look like? Are you engaged in relationships "**along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart**" who can help you in your pursuit of righteousness?
- How can you avoid "quarrels" in the church?