

2 Timothy 4

2 Timothy 2:14-19

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Text Comment

Now the paragraph that we are about to read explicitly concerns the church's teachers: good teachers and bad teachers are contrasted in various ways. However, there is little in the Bible that applies to the church's leadership that does not, in a larger and broader way, apply to every Christian. Pastors and preachers are representative Christians and are to embody in their lives what ought to be found in any and every Christian's life. So there is nothing we are about to read that doesn't concern us all.

- v.14 There is a particular danger to which teachers are susceptible but every other Christian as well, viz. losing touch with what the truth *is for*. The truth, Paul says, is supposed to do people *good*, but it can be reduced to nothing more than something to argue about which doesn't do anybody any good. Paul will make the same point again in v. 23, so it was obviously a matter on his mind.

Here the point does not seem to be the substance of the heretical teaching that had troubled the church in Ephesus or Paul would not have told Timothy to avoid the controversy. But it may still refer to a spirit and an approach the false teachers had exemplified and which others had imbibed. Timothy is to avoid the argumentative spirit, the tendency to split hairs that had characterized the false teachers. [Mounce, 524]

- v.15 The "approved" worker is characterized, Paul says, both by faithful living and faithful teaching. "Do your best" suggests that some real effort is required to become such a worker. Think back to the previous paragraph and Paul's use of the illustrations of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. Delivering the goods in the Christian life is hard work!

There has been much debate through the ages as to precisely what "rightly handling" the Word means. The use of the term in the non-biblical Greek of the time suggests "cutting a straight path." All manner of illustrations have been employed: a mason cutting straight stones so that they can be set into a wall, a farmer plowing a straight furrow, or cutting a straight road through a hill. However it is explained, the point is clear enough. Paul is talking about correct teaching and correct living.

You may remember that the King James Version of the Bible had "rightly dividing the word of truth" and for a century and a half dispensationalists took that to mean rightly

dividing up the history of redemption as it is reported to us in the Word of God into its seven distinct periods or dispensations. That is hardly the meaning of Paul's words however and you hear that much less today than fifty years ago.

Paul's point is that such teaching and living will leave a man with no reason to be ashamed. The reference is probably not only to our lives in this world but to the judgment day.

- v.16 "Unholy chatter" or "irreverent babble" is repeated from 1 Timothy 6:20, which indicates that this way of speaking had been popularized by the false teachers in Ephesus. One commentator describes their speech as "irreligious and frivolous hair-splittings." [Lock in Mounce, 526] But its effect over time was deadly. It distracted from the truth itself and that can have fatal consequences in life.
- v.17 There is something about this kind of teaching and behavior that spreads like *gangrene*, a term that goes back at least to Hippocrates, the early medical doctor who gave his name to the oath doctors take still today: the Hippocratic oath.
- v.18 Presumably these two men were among the leaders of the heretical party in the church as they are singled out by name. Philetus is not mentioned elsewhere but Hymenaeus is mentioned as having been excommunicated by Paul in 1 Tim. 1:20. Apparently the discipline was not effective and Hymenaeus was still in the picture. [Mounce, 527]

This is one of the very few places in the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, where we are told explicitly what the false teachers were actually teaching. We know that they forbade marriage and taught abstinence from certain foods (1 Tim. 4:3), but otherwise we are given only generalities about myths and genealogies and so on. But here we are told that they taught that the resurrection had already occurred.

This article of their teaching has further led commentators to the conclusion that the false teaching in Ephesus was a kind of proto-Gnosticism, an early version of the full-blown heresy that would appear in the middle and later second century. Gnosticism was an effort to accommodate Christianity to the philosophical dualism of the Greco-Roman world, a dualism that pitted spirit against body, immaterial against material, and saw evil as rooted in the material or physical aspect of human life. Obviously the resurrection of the body would not be a congenial doctrine in such an intellectual environment, which explains why the doctrine of the resurrection, which we more or less take for granted, was highly controversial in the first and second centuries. It was easily and regularly misunderstood and surfaces controversially in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, and now to the Ephesians in his letter to Timothy. In some cases the future

resurrection was simply denied (as in Corinth) but in others it appears to have been spiritualized. Such was the case here: the resurrection was spiritualized as it must be if it no longer concerned the coming again to life of dead bodies as must have been the case if they thought the resurrection had already occurred. Resurrection was for these teachers a spiritual, not a physical event and condition.

What made this so serious is that the resurrection -- both the Lord's own and ours at the last day -- is the lynchpin of the gospel. Deny it and you deny all. You can't pull this thread out of the fabric without it completely unraveling.

By the way, lest you think we are far beyond such controversies, it was not long ago, perhaps some 20 years, that there was a minor flare-up of this teaching among post-millennialists who, as you may remember, enjoyed a revival of popularity in the 1970s and 80s. Some, predictably, took the preterist viewpoint -- that is, the view that much of what is predicted as future in the New Testament, especially concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, was fulfilled in A.D. 70 and lies in the past for us today -- I say, some took the preterist viewpoint further and argued that *everything* predicted in the NT lies now in the past, including the resurrection and the Second Coming. Happily what came to be called the hyper-preterist interpretation gained no traction and one doesn't hear of it anymore, but it is a reminder that there is little in the way of modern heresy that hasn't been dealt with before, often many times before.

- v.19 Dangerous as this false teaching is, Paul has already said in the previous paragraph that the elect will be saved. Philetus and Hymenaeus may have had some success in leading astray some Christians in Ephesus, but the Lord knows his people and will preserve them in faith and godliness. The metaphor of the seal derives from the practice of putting one's seal on the foundation of a building to indicate ownership.
- v.20 This is the second statement embossed on the seal and, as so typically in the Bible, answers the divine side with the human. The Lord will keep those he has chosen, but those who belong to him must prove themselves faithful.

You'll notice again how emphatically Paul brings right belief and right conduct together in his letters to Timothy. The purpose of the gospel message is to transform God's people into Christ like individuals. The danger of false teaching is precisely that it invariably undermines that intended result.

Now we have in our text this evening counsel regarding a perennial problem in the church: viz. differences of theological and ethical opinion. There are Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants; there are Calvinists and Arminians; there are Baptists and paedobaptists;

Pentecostals and cessationists; there are those who continue to regard the Lord's Day as an obligation for Christians to keep and there are those who do not; and the list goes on and on. From these differences whole churches take their origin. We must choose between them, a problem the first century Christians did not have, at least not to the extent we have it today. But even then, demonstrating how inevitable this problem, some followed Paul, others Apollos, and so on.

But in our text tonight we face an obvious tension. Paul has told Timothy in no uncertain terms to "guard the gospel," but he also tells his younger assistant to avoid controversy and quarreling. He is to stamp out heresy and he is to avoid needless contention. So which is which? Which is the gospel that has to be guarded and which is the needless controversy to be avoided? It is the problem that has bedeviled the church virtually since the last apostle died.

How do we fulfill this exhortation to plough a straight row with the Word of God when, as seems inevitable, our straight row is someone else's crooked one? We are facing this question in a living way in our church at this moment and are sending five men -- three ministers and two elders -- to our Presbyterian Church in America General Assembly in a week's time precisely because several such controversies are to be played out in Greenville, S.C. next week. I've generally avoided bringing these quarrels into the pulpit here, not least because I happen to regard them as needless, but they serve as perfect illustrations of the difficulty of the challenge that Paul has put before us in 2 Timothy 2.

The first concerns Dr. Peter Leithart, a ministerial member of our Pacific Northwest Presbytery, and a controversial figure in our church. Indeed, a year ago Dr. Leithart was taken to trial by the Presbytery, not because *we* thought him guilty of any doctrinal deviation but because *others* did and we thought it the best way to lay the matter to rest, to lay bare the issues in the formal way only a trial makes possible. Dr. Leithart was unanimously acquitted at trial, the trial transcript and the related documents, running to some 800 pages were placed on the Presbytery's website for all to read, but there were those who were still not satisfied. I won't belabor you with details, but let me give you one illustration of the disagreement.

Like much of the rest of this contretemps in our church, we have an argument about words. Now Paul obviously understood that words carry the freight in the teaching of the Bible. Knowing what some words mean is crucial to right understanding. Think of his use of the term "justification" or "sanctification." Knowing what those words mean is fundamentally important. So when Paul says here not to quarrel about words, we rightly don't understand him to mean that words are never of any importance. Our present argument, indeed, happens to be about the meaning of words. In his published work, Dr. Leithart has argued that the Hebrew and Greek terms for *justification* do not always mean what we mean by the term when we refer to "justification by faith," nor does the term "sanctification" always mean, or, for that matter, even

usually mean in the Bible what is meant by the term in our Westminster Confession of Faith, viz. the gradual growth of a Christian in godliness and obedience.

To be frank, those are not particularly controversial conclusions in themselves. That the Bible uses some of our favorite terms in a variety of ways and does not always mean the same thing by them is a commonplace of biblical and theological scholarship. But, for whatever reason, Dr. Leithart's pointing out of that fact has become highly controversial among some of our men. Dr. Leithart's protests that he still believes in justification by faith, as it is defined in the Westminster Standards, that he still believes that Christians must grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord, but his protests have been insufficient to quell the suspicion among some of our men that, in fact, he does not believe the doctrines he claims to confess. They believe that when he says that the New Testament usually means by "sanctification" not a gradual growth in holiness of life -- which the New Testament ordinarily discusses with other terms -- but a once-for-all transformation of character that happens at the moment we become Christians, a transformation that takes place at the same time as our justification -- "justification," remember, refers to the forgiveness of our sins and our right standing before God -- when he describes "sanctification" as a divine act -- once for all -- not a divine work -- a process, what John Murray famously called "definitive sanctification," I say, when he says that, they conclude that Dr. Leithart has confused justification and sanctification, some would say has made our new character the basis of our justification, and so has introduced the heresy of justification by works which Paul condemned as a false gospel. Dr. Leithart, of course, denies that he has done any such thing, but neither side has convinced the other of much of anything since this controversy erupted now some ten years or so ago.

They see an assault on the gospel itself; we see a serious and well intentioned and Biblically literate effort to refine our doctrine (an effort hardly unique to Dr. Leithart in any case) based on the Bible's actual way of speaking. As has happened so often in the past, brothers seem to be speaking past one another. They can't see how we can miss the heresy in Dr. Leithart's teaching and we can't understand why our brothers can't seem to understand what seems obvious to us. There are other issues in the Leithart matter, but in Greenville next week several separate efforts are going to be made to get a second bite at the Leithart apple, to set aside the acquittal at his trial and go after him again. Our rules seem to forbid this, but, be that as it may, the effort will be made.

There is another issue. As you know, the practice of child communion or paedocommunion has been a matter of discussion in our church since the early 1980s. As you may remember, I chaired the denomination's study committee and wrote the committee's minority report advocating for the practice. When the issue was joined at a General Assembly some twenty-five years ago, there was no groundswell of support to change our practice, and the PCA continues to forbid paedocommunion in its rules, though every year more men are added to our ministerial rolls who

favor the practice of paedocommunion. We who advocate for the practice understand that it is forbidden and have always submitted to the church's authority. We do not practice paedocommunion here at Faith. We require a profession of faith of everyone who comes to the Table of the Lord. On the other hand we take the full liberty granted to sessions by our rules to bring to the Table children when we believe them ready to commune. We do that at an earlier age than other PCA churches would, though it must be said that a great many PCA churches -- no matter their opinion for or against paedocommunion -- are now admitting much younger children to the Table than would have been the case a generation ago when it was typical in our churches for a child to join the church and come to his or her first communion at about 14 years of age. The church is *de facto* much closer to the practice of paedocommunion now even if *de jure* it continues to forbid its practice.

An increasing number of our men have been persuaded that our historic practice of keeping children from participation in the Lord's Supper until they are adolescents lacks any biblical support. We don't see such a delay happening in the Bible and it is not a practice ever taught in the Bible. So far as we can see, circumcised children, once they were weaned, partook of the sacramental meals in the ancient epoch as a matter of course, we know the early church included baptized children, even very little children, in their Lord's Supper and, in our view, our theology of church, children, and sacrament are arguments *for not against* the participation of the church's children in the sacrament as soon as they are able to eat bread and drink wine. But we have not yet won the day. We remain a minority viewpoint. We understand that.

However, as the years have passed more and more men have become persuaded of the practice and more and more Presbyteries have received men into the PCA ministry who are persuaded that paedocommunion is in fact the Bible's practice, not the practice we are following in the church today. In the Pacific Northwest we had already allowed that exception to the teaching of the Westminster Standards, or received a man who told us that in fact he was in disagreement with Larger Catechism 177 and its insistence that a child must be older to take the Lord's Supper, I say we had already received fourteen men into the presbytery who took that exception when Jerid Krulish took the exception during his examination for ordination. But a group of men, persuaded that it was time to stamp out what they regard as a dangerous innovation, decided to make an issue of our Presbytery's granting that exception to Jerid when he was ordained several years ago (and, as we did subsequently, to Dr. Christopher Bechtel, but the fellows at the General Assembly are only now reading *those* minutes!). I won't bore you with the details, but this issue too comes before the General Assembly in Greenville. Can the PCA presbyteries continue to do what they have been doing for a third of a century, viz. allow men to enter the ministry who are advocates of paedocommunion?

For advocates the practice it is a clear case of correcting our practice by attention to the actual teaching of the Bible. For opponents of the practice it is a dangerous innovation that threatens

judgment to the church for allowing children too young to examine themselves to partake of the Supper of the Lord. We've been talking about this for thirty years. We know what the arguments are pro and con. But neither side has convinced the other. What are we to do? For one side it is a case of guarding the gospel. For the other side it is case of practicing the gospel as a promise of salvation to us and to our children.

So what does it mean rightly to handle the Word of God in *these* situations? How do we guard the gospel and avoid needless quarreling in respect to *these* issues? We're not talking about the color of the carpet here. This is not an argument over nothing. On the other hand, no one is denying the resurrection or forbidding marriage either. Obviously we are rightly to handle the Word of God, but that is precisely the problem. One side thinks they are doing that, the other side does not. We do not agree as to what the Bible teaches in these several respects.

Well, here is my stab at attempting to do justice to both of Paul's exhortations: to guard the gospel *and* to avoid needless controversy; to show ourselves approved workmen rightly handling the Word of truth.

1. There is no getting round the sad reality of disagreement. There are three large segments of Christendom today and are likely to be for a long time to come. Sad as that is, no one knows what to do about it precisely because we cannot agree about matters that each group regards as fundamentally important. Disagreement is a fact of Christian life. Why should anyone suppose that we sin only in respect to behavior and not in respect to thinking?
2. On the other hand, unity in the church is a divine command to which our Savior attached tremendous emphasis and the warning that disunity would seriously compromise our witness to the world. So, disagreements notwithstanding, we must be committed to avoiding argument and contention and the division they spawn *as much as possible*. That is, the Lord has commanded us to do both things -- guard the gospel *and* avoid needless argument -- and we must be committed to doing both things. In my experience it is usually obvious when people are a lot more interested in doing one of those things than in doing both at the same time!
3. When Paul mentions the fact that the false teachers were denying the resurrection and forbidding marriage, he identified the kind of errors that must be proscribed and which guarders of the gospel must refuse to permit in the teaching of the church. Deny the resurrection and you have denied the gospel because the gospel *is* the announcement of the resurrection, as you learn in the early chapters of Acts where we read that the apostles were proclaiming "in Jesus the resurrection." Spiritualize the gospel and you are not rightly handling the Word of God because we are both taught and shown in the Word of God that the resurrection is, in fact, a dead body coming to life again in a new order of

physical life. Similarly, deny marriage as a Christian way of life and you deny the Ten Commandments and a great deal of biblical ethics besides.

4. When we are arguing about how a man understands the relationship between some biblical uses of the term sanctification and our typical construction of the doctrine of sanctification, or how he understands the relationship between definitive or once for all sanctification and our justification by faith in Christ, when all the while this man confesses to believe all that Presbyterians have always believed about the forgiveness of our sins and the transformation of our lives, we are clearly not talking about something equivalent to the denial of the resurrection.
5. When we are arguing about precisely when covenant children ought to begin participating in the Lord's Supper when the Bible never addresses that question specifically, when ardent Christians have practiced the sacrament both ways in the past, and when Presbyterians who agree with one another about almost everything else but who disagree about this can mount an argument pro or con that seems to them faithful to the plain-speaking of the Bible, we are obviously not talking about something equivalent to denying marriage.

Take another example. We are Calvinists and, as such, we hold to the doctrine of limited atonement, or, far better, definite or particular redemption. Some years ago a deliverance of our PCA Supreme Court in a judicial case maintained that a man could not enter the PCA ministry who did not hold to particular redemption. Uncontroversial in a way. Presbyterians can be counted on to maintain the so-called five points of Calvinism. Now we would never say, of course, that people who don't believe in the five points can't be Christians. We know that would be absurd. And some of our men who want Dr. Leithart drummed out of the church do not take the view that he's a heretic. Some of his critics merely believe that he is not sufficiently a Presbyterian, though others go much further than that.

But what is fascinating is that the new scholarship on the Westminster Assembly seems now to have concluded -- and convincingly in my mind -- that the Westminster divines themselves would not have held that a man couldn't be a Presbyterian minister and deny particular redemption, that is to say, deny one of the five points of Calvinism. There were men who served in the Westminster Assembly from beginning to end, were part of its discussions, were voting members, but who did not hold to particular redemption and they were never marginalized as a result. The final document did not teach their view, to be sure, though there is evidence the divines made *some* accommodation to these brothers in at least one place, but there is no evidence that the assembly thought these men could not be ministers in the church for which they were writing a confession of faith. We have been stricter in this respect in the American conservative Presbyterian Church than were the men who wrote our Confession of Faith. *That is a point worth pondering!*

So, where does that leave us?

1. Well, certainly we are to be faithful to the gospel, by which must be meant the main themes of the Bible's teaching, those themes that it teaches in many places and many different ways. There are a number of things one cannot disbelieve and remain a Christian. The resurrection is an example of such a thing.
2. There are other things one must believe to be a Presbyterian. This is clearly a lower order of theological standard of conformity. Remember the Scottish Presbyterian missionary and theologian John Duncan's famous confession: "I am first a Christian, next a Catholic, then a Calvinist, fourth a paedobaptist, and fifth a Presbyterian. I cannot reverse that order." Or consider this from John Stott.

"First and foremost, by God's sheer mercy, I am a Christian seeking to follow Jesus Christ. Next, I am an evangelical Christian because of my conviction that evangelical principles (especially *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia*) are integral to authentic Christianity, and that to be an evangelical Christian is to be a New Testament Christian, and vice versa. Thirdly I am an Anglican evangelical Christian, since the Church of England is the particular historical tradition or denomination to which I belong. But I am not an Anglican first, since denominationalism is hard to defend. It seems to me correct to call oneself an Anglican evangelical (in which evangelical is the noun and Anglican is the descriptive adjective) rather than an evangelical Anglican (in which Anglican is the noun and evangelical the adjective). [In Dudley Smith, ii, 101]

Well so with us. We are Christians, that's the main thing, we're Christians, we believe the Bible is the Word of God, we confess Jesus as Lord, we preach him crucified and risen from the dead, and so on. We are also Presbyterians. But more people will be in heaven who were *not* Presbyterians than who were. Like it or not. We have to live by the light we have received, but we also have to be faithful to the facts. Lots of people trust Jesus as their Savior and obey him as their Lord who do not agree with us Presbyterians about everything. *What's wrong with those people?* That fact has to be considered in the management of our disagreements and particularly before we engage in controversies. Obviously, then, when we are disputing *as Presbyterians within Presbyterianism*, with other Presbyterians who are also committed to the absolute authority of the Bible and also committed to our theological system we have to be even more careful that we are not quarreling needlessly.

3. Within a Presbyterian church there will certainly be disagreements, there always have been, but to make an issue of such a disagreement, surely one must be able to prove real and significant error to the satisfaction of thoughtful and well-intentioned men of like

mind. When that can't be rather easily done, it's time to shut up because the risk is very great that we are quarreling about words which Paul says here we are not to do.

4. Finally, it is always a good test whether teaching seems suited to produce godliness of life. Paul seems to think you can usually tell falsehood by its practical negative effects. But so does unnecessary controversy. Foolish quarrels and irreverent babble leads to *ungodliness*. We don't want that! That, I must confess, has been for me the most demoralizing aspect to these recent quarrels in our church. They have been managed so poorly that they have not contributed to anyone's godliness except perhaps people who have witnessed us at war and realized that as Christians they certainly didn't want to act like *that*!

I hardly think that I have solved the problem. But what else can be said when what is required is that at one and the same time we are to guard the gospel *and* avoid needless quarrels? As so often in biblical ethics, the one who gets it right is the one who is determined to do both things at the same time, and to be as good at the one as at the other.