

Reflections
on First Timothy

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1. By the Command of God

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God... (1 Timothy 1:1)

The Bible introduces to us the idea of revelation, and it expects us to keep this in mind as we approach it. Revelation is a display or disclosure of information by God. The information could be about himself or about anything that he knows, and he knows all things. God revealed himself to man since the beginning of creation, and spoke to Adam and Eve in words. He continued speaking to mankind even after humanity sinned. However, he did not speak to all men directly, but mainly to agents that he would create and ordain to speak and to record his words in writing.

For many generations, God spoke through his prophets, who set his words in writing for the sake of publication and perpetuity. Then, Jesus Christ came and spoke about God, about himself, and about salvation. Although Christ was superior to all the prophets who came before him, and to all the apostles who preached after him, it would be misleading to say that Christ's words were superior in authority to that of the prophets, as if the prophets spoke by their own authority. Rather, the prophets spoke by the command of God and by the Spirit of Christ, so that it was in fact Christ himself who spoke through them, and God cannot be greater than himself. He could fulfill previous revelation and deliver a fuller revelation, but not one that is greater in authority. This is not to dishonor the ministry and revelation of Christ, but to honor all biblical revelation as from Christ.

It was not Christ's intention to complete the biblical revelation by his ministry on the earth, but he said that he would do this by his Spirit through the apostles, who would deliver the rest of Christ's revelation in their sermons and written records. These apostles were chosen by Christ in person during his time on the earth. But Paul was a special case. He was a fanatic who was loyal to the Jewish religion until the resurrected Christ appeared to him and commissioned him to become an apostle of the Christian faith, and especially to the Gentiles. Thus he was an apostle not by tradition, not by succession, not by denominational affiliation, not by academic credentials, and not by the authority and approval of mere men, but by the command of God. As he testified, his knowledge of the Christian religion came by revelation, and much of the New Testament consists of what he had set down in writing. The rest of the New Testament, and indeed the rest of the Bible, was likewise produced by the hand of the prophets and the apostles by the authority of God.

The Bible is a written revelation from God, and we must approach it as such. In terms of what God has decided to tell us, and in terms of accuracy and authority, there is no difference between God and the Bible. To say, "The Bible says" is to say "God says." The two are synonymous. This provides definition to the Christian faith. That is, you can claim that you are a Christian, but you are really not a Christian if you disagree with Paul,

or Matthew, or Isaiah. As long as you disagree with the Bible, you may say that you are a Christian – you can make the sounds that form the sentence – but you cannot fool God. If you disagree with the Bible, then you disagree with God, and you are not a Christian. And if you are not a Christian, then you are entitled to none of the promises and blessings that God has deposited in Christ for those who are Christians, who are the beneficiaries.

Therefore, whenever we approach the Bible, we must remind ourselves that it is the written revelation from God, and it provides an inflexible standard that defines and governs all the doctrines and practices of the Christian faith. Whether we are reading the letters of Paul, the prophecies of Daniel, or the Psalms of David, it is Christ who speaks through the pages, and who teaches our minds as we read, so that our response to the words of Scripture is our response to God himself. There is to be no gap in our minds between faith in God and faith in the Bible, or obedience to God and obedience to the Scripture. Our attitude toward the Bible reflects our attitude to God. May the Spirit grant us wisdom to perceive and acknowledge this.

2. The Christian's Self-Definition

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God... (1 Timothy 1:1)

It is common for people to define themselves by things that are important to them, that they are proud of, or that have shaped them. For this reason, it is not unusual for them to define themselves in terms of nationality, race, training and occupation, gender, marital status, and so on. They often find it natural and necessary, and even commendable, to characterize their whole lives by these categories. Those who have undergone notable or even traumatic experiences might also allow these things to shape their identity and outlook. So there are those who define themselves as cancer survivors, or holocaust survivors, or survivors of rape, abuse, and so on.

This is unacceptable to the Christian faith. Problems occur when people define themselves by these human categories, and then allow them to frame the way they perceive the world and relate to others. For example, a person who mainly defines himself by his race might even refuse to become a Christian. I have heard of a Chinese woman who refused to believe in Christ because the Son of God in his human nature was not Chinese. Truth was secondary to her, but race was paramount. Of course, even the Jews had an analogous problem. Although Jesus was a Jew in his human nature, they were reluctant to accept someone from Nazareth. Then, there was a Chinese pastor who tried to prove that the Chinese are in fact of Jewish blood. If this sounds ridiculous, then so is "Messianic" Christianity, and so is "Black" Christianity. We know that they are poor Christians the moment they identify themselves by these terms. The rebuke that Jesus gave Peter applies to them – they have in mind not the things of God, but the things of men.

We must not sympathize with this way of thinking. Christ is to be so central in our self-definition that he should overpower and overshadow all human categories and concerns. We may be aware of these human factors, but they should become relatively insignificant in how we define ourselves. If Christ is Lord in your mind, and if he is all in all, how can your relation with him be defined by your race, your gender, or your education?

If anyone had reason to boast about the things of the flesh, Paul did. But he said that he regarded all his human credentials as rubbish, even as dung, so that he may gain Christ. He was not a Jew who happened to be a Christian, but he was a Christian who happened to be a Jew. He was not a scholar who also believed in Christ, but as a believer in Christ, he happened to be a scholar as well. His intellect did not lend credibility to the Christian faith, but it was his Christian identity that made his intellect credible. He did not define his Christian faith relative to some human factor, such as his pedigree, or education, or occupation; rather, he defined himself and everything about himself in relation to Christ and his place in Christ's kingdom. And he viewed everything in the world from that

perspective. This is another way of saying that a Christ-centered self-definition and a truly Christian worldview go together.

Are you an American? Wonderful, but consider it rubbish so that you may gain Christ. If you are a Christian at all, you are a Christian who happens to be an American, and not the other way around. You are first a citizen of heaven. Are you black? That is fine, but forget about it. If you are a Christian, you are a new creation in Christ, a unique race of God's chosen ones. "Wait," you say, "should I not take pride in my race?" Of course not. Who told you this nonsense? The world taught you this, not the Bible. If you must be proud that you are black, and if you must make a point of stressing this, then do not complain when others express their pride that they are white *instead of* black like you. Then, of course, the result is division rather than unity in Christ. What is your occupation? Are you a psychologist? Good, but do not think that psychology can explain everything, and do not read the Bible with a psychologist's mindset. Rather, judge psychology with a Christian's mindset. Christ is to be the central reference point for all our thinking and behavior. Race, gender, and class make no difference, but only a new creation in Christ Jesus.

You may complain that it is impossible to approach anything, including the Christian faith, without bringing to it our own backgrounds and presuppositions. This is true. But if you are a Christian, then you are a new creation in Christ – you have a new background. And if you are a Christian, then the Bible commands you to renew your mind – get a new set of presuppositions. Reorient your thinking, and enthrone Christ in your mind as the reference point by which you define yourself and everything else. Then, you will find it impossible to approach anything apart from your *Christian* background and presuppositions. Only then can you be assured that you have a firm grasp on your identity as a Christian.

3. Our Savior and Our Hope

...of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope... (1 Timothy 1:1)

God desires to reveal himself as Savior. As Paul explains elsewhere, God has chosen to reveal himself in forming two lines of humanity and in the way that he relates to them. He has prepared some people for destruction, and in them he reveals his justice, wrath, and power in the way that he punishes them and in the way that he will torture them forever in hell. He also demonstrates his patience in tolerating them for so long instead exterminating them before the appointed time. On the other hand, he has prepared some for salvation, and in them he displays his love and mercy, and his kindness and generosity. These are those whom he has chosen, and who would receive from him faith in Jesus Christ.

God's will is for the chosen ones to know him as Savior and relate to him as Savior. This is remarkable because other kinds of creatures do not know him this way and cannot relate to him this way. For example, the angels that have sinned were condemned and cast away from his presence. God made no effort to redeem them. And those angels that remain faithful have no need of salvation. Nevertheless, in revealing himself as Savior to those whom he has chosen for salvation, God displays this aspect of his nature and character to the holy angels as well.

The revelation of God as Savior demands the admission that humanity has plunged into a condition that requires such divine rescue. The "arm of flesh" – the strength, intelligence, and cooperation of humanity – cannot save. It cannot solve even the natural problems of this world, still less can it absolve men from the demands of divine justice and snatch them from the fire of hell. Therefore, the door to the revelation of God as Savior is the perception of man as sinner.

Further, God has revealed himself as Savior in a specific and personal manner, that is, in Jesus Christ the Son of God. In his wisdom and sovereign decree, God has made Christ the only way through which we can know him as Savior. He does not save apart from Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus is the only hope for mankind. Non-Christians have no basis to think that they will be declared righteous before the throne of God, or to think that anything good will happen to them after death. They deceive themselves when they cling to their false gods and superstitions, including their science and philosophy, and those who trust their own good works will fare no better.

On the other hand, I am certain that I shall be declared righteous before the throne of God, because I am certain that Jesus has already been declared righteous by God. My certainty does not rest on something in me or something that I have done, but on the perfect righteousness of Christ. And Christ is the basis for my hope, my expectation, that

goodness, mercy, and joy that is full of glory await me on the other side of death. This is not because I have earned these rewards by my good works. No, even my best efforts are as dirt and filth before the holiness of God – they will not stand the test. But I know that Christ has been tested and approved, and he has secured all these things for me. He has given me faith in him, so that by my affiliation with him, I share in his inheritance from the Father. The level of my esteem for Christ is my level of confidence regarding my salvation, for he is my Savior and my Hope.

4. True Son in the Faith

To Timothy my true son in the faith... (1 Timothy 1:2)

God told the first man, Adam, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." Although it is often called the "Cultural Mandate," and it is indeed a mandate, it does not suggest the scope of the culture-making that some Christians attempt to infer from it. The command to populate the earth encourages human reproduction, and to make the enterprise more reliable, it might also imply the establishment of families and states. And the command to subdue the earth might provide justification for the development of all relevant techniques and technologies, and whatever it takes to exploit nature for our short-term and long-term benefits, and for God's glory and honor, which might include a preservation of nature itself. Many other less obvious implications that are in line with the spirit and the purpose of the mandate might also be permitted.

The mandate indeed requires mankind to "make culture" in this sense. But it seems too farfetched to make it justify everything from painting to capitalism, and from poetry to rock climbing. This is not to say that these things, and many others that people attempt to justify by the Cultural Mandate, are illegitimate (although some may very well be illegitimate, or at least a waste of time), but they cannot be justified on the basis of the Cultural Mandate. Sometimes people are enthusiastic about things that they wish to pursue if they had not become Christians, and after their conversion, they wish to find biblical justification to pursue these very things, as if they were even commanded to do so.

Reproduction is without doubt a part of the mandate. God commanded man to increase and fill the earth. Nevertheless, as with some of the other commands that have been intended to be carried out by entire communities, no individual is expected to fulfill it in all the possible ways. For example, the very fact that one cannot be male and female at the same time, or to reproduce by one's sole efforts and resources, demonstrate that it is impossible for any one person to fulfill even the most basic demands of the mandate. Humanity as a whole fulfills it.

In addition, there are different ways to contribute to the fulfillment of the mandate. Certainly, we should not say that a person who adopts and raises orphans, but who has no children of his own, fails to fulfill the Cultural Mandate. He indeed contributes to the increase of humanity. It is a mistake to think that every individual must have his own biological children in order to fulfill the Cultural Mandate. The Bible says that each man has his own gift from God, so that one might remain single, and another might marry. Each must contribute to the Cultural Mandate in his own way.

Christ adds another dimension, a spiritual dimension, to the fulfillment of the Cultural Mandate. After the Fall, God divided mankind into two lines – the line of Christ and the line of Satan – and promised that a Savior would be born who would crush the head of the serpent. All are born as sinners, but some are changed and translated to the line of Christ. It is essential to understand that the two lines of humanity are not distinguished by blood, but by God's sovereign choice of the individuals, that is, by his kindness toward these individuals and by the work of his Spirit in them. Many errors have originated due to a failure to consistently apply this principle. It remains one of the root causes for a perversion of the gospel.

God promised Abraham that his descendants would fill the earth, but he never intended this to mean his natural descendants, or his descendants according to the flesh. Rather, God referred to his descendants according to the spirit, or descendants that would come about by promise, even by acts of his resurrection power. This was indicated in Ishmael and Isaac. Both were the natural descendants of Abraham, but only Isaac was the child of promise, a son that God brought about by his power, and who Abraham symbolically received from the dead when he offered him to God on an altar, only to be halted by the Angel of the Lord at the last moment. So, the children that God promised would be descendants of Abraham, would be related to him, not by the common bond of blood, but by the common bond of faith. And they would increase, multiply, and fill the earth.

This teaching would continue to receive emphasis throughout the Bible. John the Baptist rebuked the Jews for thinking that they could appeal to Abraham as their natural ancestor. He said that God could make children of Abraham out of rocks. Jesus denied that the Jews were the descendants of Abraham, since the Jews were plotting to murder Jesus, something that Abraham would never have done. In fact, Abraham saw the day of Christ and rejoiced. This is clear indication that the promise concerning Abraham's descendants refers to those who inherit the faith of Abraham, and not the blood of Abraham. He revered Christ, and anyone who does not is no son of his. In another context, Jesus stated that anyone who does the will of the Father is his brother, sister, and mother. And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that those who are of faith are the children of Abraham, and heirs of the promise.

As Christians, our mandate is not just to make children, or even to make culture, but to "make disciples of all nations." We are not to fulfill only the Cultural Mandate, but also the Great Commission. And just as Abraham's true children are children of his faith, our true sons are those who follow our Christian doctrine and example, and not those who inherit our genetic materials. I would much more readily regard someone as a son who shares my beliefs and visions, and who could promote and continue my work, than I would someone who is my biological offspring but who has not inherited my spiritual characteristics, and who does not share my devotion to Christ.

Timothy was not Paul's biological offspring, but the apostle called him a "true son," that is, a son in the faith. Are you a true son in the faith? And are you making sons in the faith? Seeing that the flesh profits nothing, but it is the spirit that counts with God, let us

commit ourselves to produce not a carnal and natural legacy, but a spiritual legacy for God's glory and honor.

5. Command the Heretics

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 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work – which is by faith. (1 Timothy 1:3-4)

One of the main duties of a Christian minister is to combat false doctrines. Paul likely has something definite in mind as he writes to Timothy. It is possible that the church is threatened with a precursor to Gnosticism, or some form of Jewish mysticism, or a mixture of the two. The exact historical context is not essential to the understanding and application of this passage, since Paul first states a broad principle, that Timothy is to put a stop to men who teach "false doctrines." He does not intend to say that these particular false doctrines should be stopped, but that all others are permitted. All false doctrines must be stopped.

A Christian minister who is unwilling or unable to do this is a liability, and introduces a dangerous vulnerability to his church. He might be unwilling to oppose false doctrines because he does not consider doctrines as essential. But they are essential, since they provide definition and guidance regarding every aspect of the Christian faith. There is no Christian faith, and thus no knowledge of God and of Christ, no salvation, no justification and sanctification, no worship of God, no fellowship with saints, and no hope of eternal life, without Christian doctrines. Without doctrines, there is nothing. Then, a minister might be unable to oppose false doctrines because he is afraid to confront heretics, or because he lacks the knowledge and intelligence to refute them. Whatever the reason, this is a serious deficiency in a minister, and it must be addressed with the utmost urgency.

We must not allow the world to teach us how to deal with false teachers. Some ministers have more respect for non-Christian standards of academic courtesy than for the Lord Jesus Christ. If they want to appear intellectual and respectable before the world, and polite according to the world's standard, then they are unfit to be preachers of the gospel. Paul does not tell Timothy to dialogue with false teachers, or to learn from their perspective, but to command them to stop.

Some people think that the best way to handle false doctrines is to put them up for debate in a public forum, so that Christians can hear both sides and decide for themselves. Again, this view comes from the world, and imposes democracy and freedom of speech upon church policy. The Church of the Living God is not a democracy. Jesus Christ is King – his opinion is truth, and his command is law. No one has the right to oppose him or to express alternate views. Of course his ministers can debate false doctrines, showing in what ways these teachings are wrong, but they are not to do this endlessly, and they are to speak with authority, commanding the false teachers to cease their heresies.

6. Strange Uses of Scripture

They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that 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 adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Timothy 1:7-11)

The false doctrines that Paul refers to have to do with "myths and endless genealogies." It is possible that he has in mind a form of Jewish mysticism that is taken up with elaborate stories and pedigrees. Although these might be interwoven with what they find in the Old Testament, they do not come from the Old Testament, but are constructed by their imagination. Thus their teachings are not based on a straightforward interpretation of the Law, but a dangerous mixture of biblical references and a collection of private, twisted, and speculative claims.

It is unimportant whether this is the exact nature of the false doctrines, since we know enough from what Paul explicitly says in the letter. That is, the false teachers present themselves as teachers of the Law, but they do not use the Law properly. And this improper use of the Law has to do with or is evidenced by the "myths and endless genealogies" in their teachings. Paul's reply reinstates the correct intent and purpose of the Law – it defines iniquities and condemns transgressors. It exposes man's rebellion, and uncovers all that is contrary to sound doctrine and all that fails to conform to the gospel. In using the Law as a sourcebook of strange wisdom and to fuel their esoteric fancies, the false teachers enable people to feel and to seem religious without having to confront to true force of its teachings.

This approach to Scripture is attractive to sinners, because it allows them to display some admiration for God's revelation without having to acknowledge its message. Thus it has continued to this day in various forms. Examples are numerous. Some have made the Law's dietary regulations into weigh-loss programs. Their materials pay lip service to God's wisdom throughout, but they refer to the health benefits that they claim these regulations confer rather than the Law's concerns regarding spiritual cleanliness, sin and atonement, and its foreshadowing of a Savior. Instead of extracting the true value of the Law, they make a mockery of it.

Then, there are those who comb through the Bible in the attempt to discover obscure references to dinosaurs, giants, and aliens, or hidden codes embedded in the text containing predictions about recent and future tyrants, wars, assassinations, tsunamis, and

economic collapses. As Paul said, they want to be teachers of the Bible, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. Their strange teachings appeal to those who want to give the appearance of being Christians, but who in reality desire a religion that is vastly different from what the Bible teaches.

The proper approach to the Bible is to take it for what it presents itself to be. It is a written record from God, a revelation, about himself and about his dealings with humanity. It is about God's power and justice, about man's depravity and failure, and then about God's grace and Christ's sacrifice, about sound doctrine and worship, and about the appointed destinies of Christians and non-Christians. The Bible is not a book of strange and esoteric doctrines, written to fuel unhealthy speculations or to amuse men with fanciful tales. It is written to instruct and empower the people of God, and to stand as a witness against those who turn away from him.

7. The Non-Christian's True Nature

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:12-17)

We should understand what Paul means when he writes, "I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." He does not deny that he was very evil, since he calls himself "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man." He does not deny that he was a sinner because he acted in ignorance and unbelief, since he calls himself "the worst of sinners." He does not mean that his ignorance and unbelief merited salvation for him or compelled God to save him, since then he would not have needed any "mercy" and "grace." And certainly not everyone who acts in ignorance and unbelief receives mercy. Therefore, the "because" in "I was shown mercy *because* I acted in ignorance and unbelief" cannot refer to something that moved God to save Paul. It indicates only that he was in a condition that was not beyond salvation. That is, he had not committed the unpardonable sin, or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Or, he had not fall under the condemnation of Hebrews 6:1-6 and 10:26-31.

Putting aside the above potential confusion, Paul's statement about his past provides us with insight about the true nature of a non-Christian.

First, a non-Christian is an ignorant person – he is stupid. From the world's perspective, few men were more informed and intelligent than Saul of Tarsus. But the world's perspective is wrong, since it is the viewpoint of foolish men. Now Paul sees that he was ignorant, and this by extension implies that other non-Christians are ignorant as well, since he was superior to most of them in non-Christian opinions, including the non-Christian (and thus false) interpretation of the Law. Non-Christians are ignorant people, and still they are guilty of sin. We must not confuse ignorance with innocence.

Second, Paul says that he acted in unbelief. In the Bible, unbelief very often indicates more than a mere lack of faith, but a hostility against God and against truth. Consider the unbelief of the Israelites whom Moses led out of Egypt. They murmured against God and

riled against Moses on many occasions. And consider Paul himself. He was not passive in his disagreement with the Christian faith, but he harbored a deep hatred against Christ and those who followed him, and this turned into blasphemy and violence. We must not confuse unbelief with a healthy skepticism against incredible claims. Unbelief is an irrational and unintelligent hostility against truth. It is a denial of reality. Non-Christians are delusional, and have no sense of what is true and real.

The non-Christian is never intelligent and never innocent. And it is against this background that we can appreciate the grace of Christ all the more. Paul sees himself as a model example. If Christ could exercise patience toward someone like him, the worst of sinners, and if Christ could manifest his grace to someone like him, then God has once for all made the statement that others could also receive forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ. In saving someone like Paul, and in saving someone like you, Christ reveals the greatness of his mercy, and honors the Father by displaying this aspect of his nature.

Paul's summary of what happened to him exhibits two essential ingredients of an accurate understanding and preaching of the gospel. First, the true extent of the depravity of man must be acknowledged. The stupidity and hostility of the non-Christian cannot be obscured or shoved aside, whether in our self-understanding regarding our pre-converted state or in our perception and preaching regarding the present state of non-Christians. If you do not think that non-Christians are stupid and hostile, like you were before you became a Christian, then you deny the gospel. You do not even fully acknowledge the sinner's need for it. Second, the grace of Christ is announced against this background of the utter foolishness and depravity of man, and as a result, his glory is revealed and magnified.

Paul writes that the false teachers promote myths and controversies rather than God's work. What, then, is God's work? It is the preaching of this message about God's mercy in saving sinners. It is to declare the sinfulness of man and to announce the grace of Christ that rescues him from condemnation. This is the proper use of Scripture, and our task is to publish this message to all nations.

8. The Good Fight

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. (1 Timothy 1:18-20)

There is a spiritual conflict that defines and pervades every area of human life. This conflict is between Christ and Satan, good and evil, truth and deception, and by extension from these, often between Christians and non-Christians. There is no choice and no neutral position in this conflict. Whether or not you like it, you are a part of it. There are only two sides to this conflict, and you either stand with one or the other. Your involvement in it is likely to be more evident if you are a minister of the gospel, so that your responsibility in connection to it might be greater, but no one is exempt from it.

You may say, "I do not want to be against anyone or anything. I stand for Christ and for the gospel." However, Christ is not nothing or an empty idea. He is a person, and he represents rationality and righteousness. A person can be hated and opposed, and therefore a person can have enemies. And rationality, truth, wisdom, and so on, are opposed to irrationality, deception, and foolishness. Righteousness is not the same as godlessness, but is opposed to it.

You may wish to insist that you are only for Christ, and that you are against no one and against nothing. But Christ himself is against all those who disagree with him, and all those who disbelieve in him and disobey him. And they are against him as well. Therefore, if you are for Christ, you are against the rest of the world, and the rest of the world is against you. Jesus told his disciples that the world would hate them because it hated him first. Non-Christians oppose him and hate him, and so they hate all those who follow him, who agree with him, believe in him, and preach about him. The world hates Christ, and if you are for Christ, then the world will hate you, and will fight against you. Instead of avoiding this conflict, God want us to fight everything that opposes his authority and his revelation.

This is a "good" fight. We stand on the side of God, of that which is holy, true, rational, and beautiful. The effort is worthwhile because, according to God's own standard, these things are worth fighting for. They should be defended and advanced on the earth. It is a legitimate use of spiritual force because God has commanded us to engage in battle as soldiers of Jesus Christ. It is a joyous fight because the rewards are great and ultimate victory is assured.

The fight is much more than a playground scuffle. Paul tells Timothy to "fight the good fight." The words used there could be translated "fight a good warfare" or "wage a good campaign." The apostle has in mind a prolonged conflict that requires strategy and stamina. Victory belongs to the wise and informed, to the prayerful and contemplative, to the courageous and sacrificial, and not to those who exhibit only brief outbursts of religious excitement.

There are two aspects to our fight. There is the fight to maintain and to advance a pure and full form of Christianity in the objective and public sense. It is a fight for "the faith" – that is, the Christian faith or the Christian religion. The emphasis falls on the doctrines that define our system of belief. If you lose doctrine, you lose the truth, and you lose your contact with God and with Christ. Thus if you lose doctrine, you lose everything. Then, there is the fight to persist and increase in our commitment to the Christian faith in the personal and individual sense. Each individual must perceive the objective truth of Christian doctrines, and then believe and follow these doctrines. Some have repressed the voice of conscience to renounce that which they recognize to be true, and thus shipwrecked the faith that they profess.

These two aspects of the fight are related. Objective doctrines can affect the subjective desires of an individual, and an individual's desires can determine whether he wishes to believe the right doctrines. Sound doctrines honor the wisdom, kindness, and majesty of God. They tend to be simple and direct, and they instruct men in truth and holiness. False doctrines, on the other hand, exalt man – they please his pride and approve his autonomy. They stimulate sin and speculation, and tends to turn religion into satisfaction without propitiation, and the amusement of the self rather than the worship of God. This is why Jesus said that if anyone chooses to perform God's will, he will perceive whether or not Christian doctrines came from God. Since one affects the other, which one comes first – the knowledge of the truth, or the commitment to the truth? It is God's action on the soul that comes first, and then both factors strengthen each other. May God work in our hearts by his Word and Spirit, so that we may want to do the truth, and know the truth to do!

Just about every biblical doctrine and practice is under attack today, and the enemies are often able to gain a foothold even in our churches because the ministers and members compromise with the world, and they sometimes even actively introduce errors into the congregations. This is no time to avoid conflict or to shun the inconvenience of personal involvement. Christ calls us to fight! If you have any sense of loyalty to the Lord, then you will fight, and you will win, if you will hold fast to sound doctrine and a clear conscience.

9. Enlarge the Vision

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

The Christian faith is defined by some very rigid doctrines. It makes assertions concerning historical events, abstract principles, and divine matters that are so specific and inflexible that any system that alters or relaxes them cannot still claim to be the same religion, and therefore cannot share in its unassailable foundation. Nevertheless, it is so suitable to all kinds of people, so aptly speaks to their needs and concerns, and so rich in its wisdom and authority that it has a rebuke to correct any transgression committed by a person belonging to any group, that those who fail to grasp the transcendent nature of the gospel sometimes slip into the error of thinking that the Christian faith exclusively belongs to them, that it is intended for their kind, and their kind alone.

The Lord Jesus was a Jewish male in his human nature, but his ministry and influence transcended this, and he circulated among all kinds of people. His disciples included rulers and commoners, men and women, Jews and Samaritans, fishermen and tax collectors, intellectuals and prostitutes, or those who began as prostitutes. He was one man assuming one persona everywhere he went. He never changed his principles and practices, and he never compromised his teachings. Yet all kinds of people were engaged by him in a personal and relevant manner. He refused to become all things to all men, but he demanded all men to forsake all things so that they might follow him. He was indeed exclusive, insisting that he was the only way to God. But he was inclusive in the sense that all kinds of people could find God through him.

The temptation which captures the ignorant is that the Christian faith is so suitable for their own group – since it is suitable for all kinds of people – that they think they possess an exclusive right to the gospel, and that those who do not belong to their group must either be excluded, or be second-class in Christ's kingdom, or must become like them in order to become a part of the chosen people. Of course, this explains the exclusive mindset of some Gentiles, and the contemporary cliques of believers.

The Jews had a similar mindset for a different reason. They thought that salvation exclusively belonged to them because God chose their nation to plant the seed of the gospel. However, from the beginning God had intended them to be the mere starting point, so that salvation would spread out *from them*, not that people must come *to them* and join themselves to them in order to obtain. The result was that, not only did the Jews withheld salvation from the world, but they themselves refused to enter in, and failed to obtain it for themselves.

Christians are ensnared by an illegitimate exclusivity when they limit the gospel to only those aspects of their lives that are most relevant to them. For example, the Christian system is a mind-boggling treasure of intellectual riches. The accuracy and precision of its history, the intricacies of its arguments, the scope and coherence of its doctrines – in short, the intellectual perfection that it evinces from every conceivable angle of study – make it an everlasting fountain of wisdom that satisfies the intellectual elite. But what a tragic error it would be for the intellectual to think that the Christian faith has nothing for the uneducated man.

Likewise, the good news from Jesus Christ rescues the oppressed from despair, and injects hope into the downtrodden. But it would be a mistake for them to think that Christ saves only those oppressed by men. There are those who so resent the wealthy and the powerful that they think these people do not deserve the gospel, as if they deserve it because they are victims. Victims often take on a self-righteous mentality, as if they are righteous because they are victims of oppression. This is a complete delusion. The gospel of Christ saves the oppressed, but it is not only a victim's gospel.

The Jews have no right to claim it for themselves, and preach a "Messianic" Christianity. That is a desperate attempt to assert a place for their culture, or to exert some control over doctrine and practice. But the promise of salvation was only released through them. It was never intended to remain with them. Neither is it withheld from the Jews. And just as no American should think that the Christian faith is a Jewish religion, no Asian should think that it is an American religion. It does not belong exclusively to any race, gender, or class.

Paul begins his instruction for public worship by expanding our thinking, or our application of the Christian faith. Prayers are to be made "for everyone," even kings. They are not beyond the power of God or the promise of the gospel. Rulers often stand as hindrances to the gospel, and it is easy for some believers to think that they should pray against them rather than for them. But Paul calls us to enlarge our vision, and our thinking on what God can do with our rulers and with everyone.

10. Peace and Quiet

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

True faith is indestructible. It is purified but not consumed by the fire of persecution. Times of hardship force us to rethink our motives and priorities, to rededicate our lives to the Lord Jesus, and to redouble our efforts to live for him with courage, holiness, and compassion. It destroys complacency and generates resolve to abandon personal comfort and security for the sake of the gospel, so that the faith of Jesus Christ may be established in the hearts of men.

False converts cannot endure, because they lack true faith. They are exposed, and fall by the wayside. This relieves the church of the burden of non-Christian infiltrators by cleansing the membership of hypocrites, and this reduces internal conflicts and improves its example before the world. The Bible teaches that a small impurity, a little trouble area, can spread and infect the entire congregation. And Paul cites the Law's command to expel an evil person from the community. When the church fails to deal firmly with heretics and hypocrites, hardship can compel progress.

So much spiritual good has been produced by hardship that although our flesh cringes from it, some of us may wish for God to revive his people by it, even by sending extreme persecution instigated by political authorities. Those of us who do not wish for this may still wonder if that is what it takes to awake the church from its compromise, its impurity, its inaction, and its evident lack of commitment to the faith once for all set forth by the prophets and the apostles.

Even so, Paul shows us that a peaceful climate is more conducive to the propagation of the Christian faith, and that this should be what believers pray for and desire. True faith stands firm under pressure, but comfort and tranquility can also test a person's character. The flesh senses no danger, but will the spirit then go to sleep? Scripture warns us to remain always alert, lest temptation overtakes us unawares. That said, there are obvious advantages to peace and quiet. A stable environment permits Christians to establish churches and seminaries, to marry and to raise children, and to pursue long-term projects that serve the interest of Christ's kingdom. The freedom to study, to preach, and to worship is invaluable, and is the desire of all those who thirst for a deeper fellowship with God.

Government can make life easier or harder for Christians, and we are frequently disappointed by it. Its policies often restrict our freedom to preach and to worship, and its laws often fall short of upholding God's moral commands. But God is in control of the

government. The Bible says that he directs the heart of a king like a stream of water. He controls even the thoughts and decisions of the highest human powers. And through the apostle he instructs us to pray for all those who are in authority, in order that they might know and obey God, or if God's will for them does not go this far, at least enact regulations that permit the safe and free practice of the Christian religion. This also reminds us to pray about the governments in other nations, so that they would not mistreat their people, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.

11. The Gospel for All Groups

This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

There is a strong emphasis in the New Testament that, in a specific sense, the gospel is for "all men" and that God intends to save "all men." And it is clear in what sense this is meant. However, this emphasis has been often misrepresented because many people are careless and dishonest in handling the Scripture, so that they fail to respect the contexts of the passages and to take into account the biblical motifs that are relevant to their proper interpretation.

To illustrate, the Bible teaches that God's arm is not short. It would be naïve to infer from this that God has a physical arm, or even a physical body. Such an inference does not take the text of Scripture seriously, but rather disrespects the whole testimony of Scripture about the nature of God, that he is spirit, and that he is without physical form and substance. When the text is read in relation to the whole of Scripture, it becomes obvious that the expression is only a metaphor to say that God's power is strong and his influence extensive.

We are now interested in two details in Paul's statement. The first is his mention of God's desire, and the second is the meaning of "all people." We cannot settle all the details in this brief reflection on the text, but we can come to a conclusion that is clear enough to enable us to grasp its main lesson.

The Bible teaches that God decrees all that he desires, and performs all that he decrees. In other words, if God desires something, it will surely happen. No one can withstand his power. Nothing can thwart his plan. Therefore, if God desires to save "all people" in this sense – that is, in the sense that he decrees it – then "all people" shall surely be saved.

Another possible interpretation for God's desire in this verse is that Paul is referring to God's moral command. A moral command is only a definition of right and wrong, and of obligation. It does not specify what God has decided shall happen or what he will cause to occur. When Paul told the Athenians that God now commands all men everywhere to repent, he did not mean that God now causes all men everywhere to repent, but that God demands all men everywhere to repent. Of course, repentance had been a demand since the beginning, but until then God had not caused the demand to be published to all men everywhere.

Then, there are also two possible meanings for "all people." Paul could be referring to all individuals, or every single person in all of history. Or, he could be speaking in line with the rest of the Bible and thus refers to all kinds of individuals, that is, individuals of each

race, gender, class, and other classifications. What he means here also affects the possible meaning for God's desire. In particular, if Paul is referring to all individuals, then he cannot be referring to God's decree when he says that God desires to save all men. This is because God's decree is always effective. If God decrees to save all individuals, then all individuals will be saved. But many passages of Scripture inform us that thousands upon thousands of individuals will not be saved; therefore, if Paul is referring to all individuals, then he cannot also be referring to God's decree. This combination is impossible.

If Paul is referring to all individuals, then when he mentions God's desire, that must refer to God's moral command. That is, if Paul is referring to all individuals, then he is making the point that it is God's command that all individuals believe the gospel. This is true in itself because God indeed demands every person to believe the gospel. However, the combination is unlikely in this verse, because this is not the language that Paul uses. He does not say that God "desires" all men *to believe*, but that he "desires" all men *to be saved*. If he has in mind a moral obligation, then the language of faith and repentance would be more fitting, and this is the language that he used with the Athenians. Since it is unlikely that Paul is referring to God's moral command, it is unlikely that he is saying here that God now demands all kinds of people to be saved.

The only combination that fits the text is that Paul is referring to God's decree, not God's moral demand, and that he is referring to his decree about all kinds of people, not all individuals. In other words, it is God's decree that all kinds of people will be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Because this is his decree, this is what shall happen, and indeed this is what has been happening since the time of the apostle. This not only fits the emphasis of the rest of the New Testament, but it is also consistent with the immediate context. When Paul says that believers should pray "for everyone," he means all kinds of people, not only the poor and oppressed, but also "for kings and all those in authority." Then, a few verses later Paul writes that he is a teacher to the Gentiles, which is consistent with his constant emphasis that the truth is not taught only to the Jews.

The New Testament repeatedly opposes the restrictions that people placed on the scope of salvation, and compels them to enlarge their thinking. They harbored these restrictions in their minds because of prejudice, elitism, tradition, and so on, but they were not applied to individuals as such, but to entire groups of people defined by race, gender, class, or some such thing. In other words, when the Bible teaches about the breadth of God's mercy, it does not have in mind a "some individuals vs. all individuals" debate, but a "some groups vs. all groups" debate.

In fact, when it comes to individuals, the Bible insists that God does not desire and has not decreed to save all individuals. In Romans 9, it even says that God has deliberately created some individuals for destruction, and has individually decreed their damnation. So the "some individuals vs. all individuals" contrast is not in consideration in our passage, and is never in view when it is said that God wants "all" to be saved.

Many people are out of touch with the way that the biblical writers think, and thus impose their own categories into the text. Their own thinking is always taken up with the

salvation of individuals, and they assume that when the Bible says "all men," it means all individuals. In hijacking Scripture to advance their private agenda, they subvert its true intention and meaning, robbing it of its force and wisdom, and all the while think that they are doing God a service by promoting the false doctrine that he wishes to save all individuals. On the other hand, the real concern of the apostles is to tear down the prejudices of men, and to correct their attitude about the kinds of people that God has decided to save by his Son Jesus Christ.

12. There is One God, the Trinity

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time. (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

The message of Christianity is that there is only one way to know God, to gain truth, and to enter heaven, and that is our way, the way of Jesus Christ. All other religions and philosophies are false, and lead men to delusion and everlasting punishment. Because of this, all people can be divided into Christians and non-Christians, and all thinking can be divided into Christian views and non-Christian views. Although there are varieties of non-Christians, they are essentially the same, having in common their basic principles of thought, their unrighteousness and rebellion, their irrational and foolish thinking, and their ultimate damnation. On the other hand, there are no such shared characteristics between what is Christian and what is non-Christian. This is the distinction that truly makes the difference.

It is often said that the three major monotheistic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This could be true under a tremendously broad definition of God, but it is misleading in serious religious discussions and comparisons.

Christians affirm that there is only one God, and he is a Trinity, and that there is no God that is not a Trinity. An adequate consideration of any member of the Trinity must include his relationship to the other members. Thus, for example, an adequate consideration of the second member must mention that he is the Son; however, this necessarily denotes a relationship to the Father. The significance of this point is that, although we affirm that each member of the Trinity is fully God in the sense that each possesses all the attributes and powers of God (each is all-powerful, all-knowing, etc.), the Triune nature of God is an integral part of the definition of God, so that the Son is God not only because he is all-powerful, all-knowing, and so on, but also because he has a place in the Trinity. Therefore, there is only one God in the sense that there is only one Trinity.

This is surely unacceptable to the false religion of Islam. Beginning from their erroneous idea of God, Muslims cannot, or at least should not, acknowledge that Christianity is monotheistic in the same sense or in a sense similar enough that it remains meaningful to think that the two religions have this in common.

As for Judaism, the Trinity is consistent with God's revelation in the Old Testament. God has revealed himself as a family or a community since the beginning, and as the history of revelation progressed, this was made known with increasingly explicit terms. Yet the Jews think that the Christian concept of God is blasphemous. Why? Jesus said that the

Jews did not believe the Scripture. They had never accepted what God said about himself. Even Christians might hesitate to say that the Jews affirm some different idea of God, but the truth is plainly recorded. When God revealed himself to them through intelligent speech without bodily form, they made a golden calf. And when he appeared to them in human form to teach them about himself, they killed him.

Jesus said that if they had believed the Old Testament, then they would have recognized him and believed him as well. In this sense, the Old Testament had always been part of the Christian Bible, and without anachronism, those who believed it were Christians, whether they were Jews or not. The religion of the Jews was not the religion of the Old Testament. Rather, using the background and history provided by it, they built an elaborate system that consisted of their own doctrines and traditions designed to subvert the Old Testament. Jesus explicitly rebuked them for this. Thus it is not outrageous to claim that the Jewish concept of God does not in fact come from the Old Testament (although it borrows from it), and that from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible testifies only of the Triune God.

The Christian God is unique to the Christian faith. No non-Christian shares the same or even a similar concept of God, and if a person does, he is already a Christian.

13. There is One Mediator, Jesus Christ

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time. (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

The Christian idea of God is so different from all other conceptions of deity that this point alone distinguishes our faith from all non-Christian systems of thought, including Judaism and Islam. Only by severely diluting our idea of God can we say that we affirm monotheism with them in a similar sense. We indeed affirm that there is one God, as they say they do, but God has revealed that he is a Trinity, so that a God who is not the Trinity is not God at all. Thus non-Christians do not believe in God, even when they say they do. They can make the sounds that affirm such a belief, but their thoughts do not correspond to anything in reality. There is no such thing as a non-Triune God.

The Christian doctrine about Jesus Christ further divides us from all non-Christians and our faith from their systems of thought. We affirm that he is fully divine and fully human, in that he is the incarnation of God the Son, and this God-man is the sole mediator between deity and humanity. If the Christian concept of God alone is sufficient to distinguish the Christian religion from all non-Christian systems, the doctrine of Christ as sole mediator proves devastating to all doctrines and traditions that falsely claim the Christian name, including Catholicism, Mormonism, and other cults that borrow and distort the faith of Jesus Christ.

Any doctrine cannot be true if it persuades men to depend on anyone other than Jesus Christ for full access to God. Catholicism, of course, is one of the most obvious offenders. Paul's point is straightforward and unmistakable – there is only one God and no other, and there is only one mediator and no other. To introduce other personalities as necessary bridges between God and men, and to make the heresy thoroughly absurd, between Christ *the Mediator* and men, is to subvert this simple model of spiritual access. The saints and angels would be horrified by the reverence that so many misguided individuals direct toward them.

There are less obvious manifestations of this tendency to place a wedge between God and men, and to place mediators between the Mediator and men. Humanity is prone to idolatry, and inferior Christians often turn away from non-Christian idols only to replace them with Christian ones. Thus they group themselves into cliques and proclaim that they follow this preacher or that professor. And because they consider their idol superior than the rest, they consider themselves superior for following him. But Paul refers to this primitive problem as a display of carnality. So when someone suggests to me that he is superior because he follows so-and-so a theologian, apologist, or preacher, I know that he is carnal and inferior.

Then, scholars often make themselves into mediators between God and men, and again with the even more absurd phenomenon, into mediators between the Mediator and men. They do this by making their specialized disciplines in biblical studies the necessary gateways to a sound understanding of Scripture. This puts ordinary people at their mercy, so that a Bible that has been translated into the language of the public remains closed and forbidden. I find that scholars often overstate the significance of their findings, and they are so engrossed with their narrow points of interest and research that their conclusions are often either already stated in the text of Scripture or plainly contradicted by the text of Scripture. Their effect is destructive because they propagate the impression that ordinary readers cannot trust what the Bible says in straightforward sentences, as if some nuisance in the Greek or some factoid in history can completely alter the meaning of the text.

Scholars must ask themselves, are they really guiding men to Christ, or putting themselves in between Christ and men by making themselves appear indispensable when they are really not? The truth is that much of the Bible is, and even without specialized training, can be recognized as clear and simple, and all of it is logical and without even a hint of paradox or contradiction. The most important skill in Bible interpretation is basic reading comprehension, not any specialized training. And it seems that the latter is in fact more easy to come by than the former.

The doctrine that Christ is the only mediator between God and men carries many other implications. For this reason, it must be constantly emphasized, and we must strive to correct unconscious violations of it in our theology and practice. For example, parents who are believers should not assume that their faith has any direct bearing on their children's salvation. Christ is the only mediator. A husband or wife must not assume that he or she is a believer just because the spouse seems to be one. All this appears elementary, but how many people feel a measure of security just because they are related in some way to devout believers? That feeling is an empty promise. What do I do? By the strength that God gives me, I throw myself at the feet of Christ, wrap my arms around him, and refuse to let go. And I have great confidence before God because I have great confidence that Christ is justified and accepted before God.

The minister's task, and indeed the task of every believer, is to tell sinners to do this – that is, to lay hold of Christ for themselves, and to cling to him as their very life and breath, so that they may be saved. The greatest betrayal against divine grace and our holy calling is to gather disciples for ourselves. It is true that we can become teachers to others, but it is to teach them to trust Christ, and not ourselves. We cannot save the people; we cannot give them what they need. But we tell them, "Go to Christ, and you will find salvation, power, and refreshment, and living water to satisfy your soul. Go to him now with your mind, with your words. Only he can save you from condemnation, and grant you assurance before the Holy Father."

14. The Knowledge of the Truth

And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle – I am telling the truth, I am not lying – and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles. (1 Timothy 2:7)

Christianity teaches that there is one God and one mediator between God and men. When these two ideas are expanded and their implications made explicit, we see that they sum up an elaborate system of thought that defines itself with very specific doctrines that cannot be confused or reconciled with non-Christian religions and philosophies. The Christian God, the only God, is defined as a Trinity that is in turn defined as the union of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The mediator, the only one that can bring peace between deity and humanity, is Jesus Christ, who is an incarnation of God the Son. The way in which he accomplished the work of reconciliation is also specifically defined. Paul writes that Christ gave himself as a ransom. By his death, he paid the penalty for the sins of those who would believe, so that they may obtain forgiveness. And as Paul adds elsewhere, by his resurrection, he also secured their justification. After that, he ascended to the right hand of God, and has obtained for his people all spiritual blessings.

There is a necessary connection between salvation and the knowledge of the truth, and the acknowledgement of the truth. Some commentators assert that Paul avoids an emphasis on knowledge and the intellect in order to distinguish Christian doctrines with Gnostic heresies. But if Paul has Gnostic or pre-Gnostic ideas in mind at all, it is obvious that he takes the opposite strategy, in that his emphasis on knowledge and the intellect is pervasive in all his writings, so that it is only with the utmost prejudice that these commentators can assert their interpretation. Paul not only uses the word "knowledge" (in its various forms) over and over again with positive connotations, and makes it a foundation for Christian ministry and living, but he even makes it necessary for salvation. The point is further reinforced when we take into account that this emphasis is often made without the use of the word "knowledge." Within the space of only several verses, Paul characterizes Christianity as a thoroughly intellectual religion with the use of the word "knowledge," the use of the word "truth," in his precise statement of Christian doctrine, and in his self-identification as a herald and a teacher.

The difference between Christianity and Gnosticism is not that the former relegates intellectualism to a secondary position while the latter exalts knowledge. In fact, Christianity stresses the intellect much more than Gnosticism could ever dream of doing. Rather, the difference is that Christian knowledge is public, simple, sober, and rational. It is accessible to all kinds of people. There are no secret keys and levels, no hidden codes and mantras. There are no speculative ideas and mystical fairytales, and no logical paradoxes.

But at least for the purpose of this discussion, the most important factor that distinguishes Christianity, not only from Gnosticism but from all non-Christian belief systems, is that the Christian faith is truth. Paul associates salvation with the knowledge and the acknowledgment of the truth. Here he does not refer to a knowledge of a person, but a knowledge of truth – that is, of thoughts and propositions. Of course, these may be thoughts and propositions about a person, but as it is, the stress falls on the intellectual nature of this knowledge. It is the intellect that understands and acknowledges truth. Then, the content of this truth is defined as the Christian teachings about the one God, the Trinity, and the one mediator, Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith understands the difference between truth and fantasy. To be a Christian is to acknowledge that the teachings of the Bible are true – that there is one God, the Trinity, that there is one mediator, Jesus Christ, that this mediator gave himself as a ransom for all kinds of men, and if God is gracious to grant faith, then he was a ransom to *this* particular man who now affirms the truth.

In addition to defining how we must come to Christ, the fact that it is Christianity that insists on the distinction between truth and fantasy also dictates how we must confront the world with the gospel. Truth belongs to the Christian religion, and thinking in terms of truth versus fantasy is our way of thinking. Thus rather than backing away from the intellectual arena, we challenge the non-Christians as to whether *they* know the difference between truth and fantasy. While we are always prepared to provide an explanation of our faith, we challenge the non-Christians to give an account of their beliefs. We refuse to accept their beliefs as the standard by which we must be judged, and we demand that they justify their principles and lifestyles.

Because Christianity deals with truth, it deals with the intellect. And because it deals with the intellect, the methods of its propagation are also intellectual. Paul states the Christian doctrine – that there is one God and one mediator, Jesus Christ – and then he calls himself a herald and a teacher of this doctrine. That is, he uses intelligent communication in the forms of spoken and written words to spread this doctrine. This must be a controlling consideration in our philosophy of ministry or preaching, since any method that does not focus on a verbal communication of biblical doctrines fails to correspond to the nature of the gospel and the Christian faith. In their panic to make their message relevant to the culture, many preachers have made their message irrelevant to Christianity. Whatever they are doing, they are not doing Christian ministry, and thus they have made themselves irrelevant.

The real problem, and the real reason why they felt the need to change, is because they were never preaching the actual gospel to begin with. Accommodating themselves to the world's sinful palate, whether we are talking about the content of the message or the way the content is presented, may make them relevant to non-Christians, but useless to Christ. Of course non-Christians would consider an unbiblical message presented in an unbiblical manner interesting and relevant, but such a ministry has nothing to do with the gospel.

We may make superficial adjustments to remove unnecessary hindrances and misunderstandings, but the message and the method must remain the same. The gospel is repulsive to those whom God has chosen to damn, but to those whom he has chosen to save, it is precious and glorious, and the very power and wisdom of God. Those who direct their energy toward removing the stigma of the gospel before the world are misguided and unfaithful men. Rather, we must make every effort to increase the clarity and force with which we confront the world with the victory of Christ and the salvation that he brings to those who believe.

Now, the Bible insists that Jesus is the mediator not only for one kind of men. He did not die for people of only one race, one gender, one class, but for all kinds of people. Thus we can say to any kind of person, "Yes, this is for you too. Yes, you can have it too. If God is gracious to you and cause you to believe in Christ and place your hope in him alone, then you will be saved from this wicked generation and from everlasting hellfire." When it comes to salvation, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor, but a distinction is made in those who have faith in God and who are a new creation in Jesus Christ. This also means that the gospel is able to penetrate the boundaries of men. Jews can preach the gospel to Gentiles with good effect, and Gentiles can preach to Jews. And the rich can minister to the poor, just as the poor can tell the rich about the true treasures of heaven. If sin can transcend culture with very little adjustment or translation, then so can the gospel. The main need of the hour is not greater sensitivity to cultures or better missionary strategies, but a stronger confidence in the gospel, and to believe that it is truly the power of God to save.

15. Male Leadership in the Church

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (1 Timothy 2:11-15)

We live in a world of prejudice. Some think that Jews are superior to non-Jews, some think that men are superior to women, and some think that the rich are superior to the poor. The prejudice exists in every direction, so with great bitterness, some would insist that women are superior to men, and some would claim that the poor are superior to the rich, at least in virtue. The world's solution to prejudice is to minimize these distinctions; however, since these distinctions are either inherent and permanent, or at least difficult to change, both the distinctions and the prejudice remain, and these different kinds of people are left without any principle that unite them.

The world's attempt to minimize distinctions usually propose that all kinds of people are good. This is false and has resulted in failure. The Bible's approach is entirely different. It condemns all kinds of people as guilty before God. Whether a person is Jew or non-Jew, male or female, rich or poor, he or she is born a sinner, a child of wrath. No matter what group a person belongs to, the Bible says, "There is no difference." All men and women are contemptible. But then, it declares Jesus Christ as the true principle of unity among those who look to him as Head and Lord. In him, the Jew is not superior to the non-Jew, because no race can compare to the new creation race, the race of Jesus Christ. The man is not superior to the woman, since through Christ we are all members of one body. The rich person is not superior to the poor person, for we are all joint-heirs of the true riches in Christ Jesus.

In absorbing human distinctions into true unity through Jesus Christ, the only distinction that matters has come to the forefront, and that is the distinction between Christians and non-Christians. The race, gender, and class of a person makes no difference when it comes to his access to God through Jesus Christ. But whether a person comes through Jesus Christ makes the decisive difference, for he is the only way to God and to salvation from sin and hell. Thus since the beginning, the Bible divides mankind into these two main groups.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that Scripture abolishes the distinctions between race, gender, and class. Where relevant, it repeatedly reinforces some of these distinctions that God has instituted either by creation or by providence. Again, the Bible does not share the world's approach in promoting harmony among men. It is by adopting the world's thinking in reading certain biblical passages that some have come to oppose

several prominent and explicit teachings of Scripture, such as those concerning male leadership in the home and in the church.

The Bible indeed says that there is no Jew and Gentile, no male and female, and so on, in Christ, but the context always has to do with the condemnation and justification of mankind. That is, whether male or female, all human persons are condemned in Adam. And whether male or female, all who believe in Christ are saved by him. The human distinctions remain. A rich person does not lose all his money just because he becomes a Christian. The money still belongs to him, and he can still purchase things that the poor cannot. This is established by God's providence. The two were equally condemned under Adam, and now they are equally justified, and have equal access to the throne of grace. Yet their earthly standing has not changed. The same applies to race and gender.

When it comes to order in the home, the Bible is clear that the man is the head of the house, and the wife must submit to him in everything as unto the Lord. Here Paul is referring to order in the house of God, or the church, and he states that men are to assume the leadership, and women are not to usurp them. This might appear sexist according to the standards of the world, and it is pathetic to see how Christians who adhere to the teachings of the Bible nevertheless try to explain how this passage is not sexist. What do I care about the world's standards? According to non-Christians – at least some of them, since they do not agree – this is indeed sexist. So what? Their standards are wrong. The Bible says that, because of their defective intellect, they regard the gospel as foolish, but we perceive that it is the power and the wisdom of God. Rather than convincing them that the Bible does not violate their standards, Christians should attack their standards.

There is nothing in Scripture that withholds learning opportunities to women. They are to have equal access to biblical teachings. However, Scripture indeed forbids them from seizing positions of authority in the church. This does not mean that their ministry opportunities are very limited, only that their official influence is restricted, and that the ministry work that they perform must be done under the supervision of male leadership. The wife cannot be head in the home over her husband, but she has tremendous liberty as long as she operates under her husband's authority. A similar principle applies in the household of God.

There is a woman preacher whose ministry is internationally recognized today. The organization and its publications all come under her authority. Her husband is reduced to such a negligible role that I went several years without even knowing his name, until I saw a small advertisement in her magazine that mentioned something about him. Once I heard her speak on a biblical text that deals with female submission to male leadership. She could not deny the plain words of the passage, but at one point she roared, "I do submit to my husband!" After that, the audience was too afraid to disagree with her.

A woman like this is a disgrace to Christ, a dishonor to her husband, and teaches rebellion to female believers who envy what appears to be a liberty to serve Christ unencumbered by the restrictions of their husbands. On the other hand, one wonders how she has been allowed to carry things so far. It is likely that her husband has relinquished

leadership due to her stronger personality. Although this might feel like an act of love, it is an act of rebellion against God, and against the order he has prescribed for the home and for the church. Such an arrangement allows a cowardly man to lessen the burden on himself, but it is a responsibility that God has placed upon him and not on his wife. As the designated leaders, men are supposed to enforce God's instructions. Thus when women overturn the proper order, men are also culpable. The wrath of God will not be far from the chaos and disaster that result.

If men fail to lead, to give oversight and direction, and women are not supposed to subvert them, then great frustration is inevitable. It is not enough for men to oppose female leadership – that in itself is not leadership. Men must assume the roles that God has ordained for them, without fear, shame, or apology, and then make organized efforts to mobilize all the members of the body of Christ to perform the work that God has prescribed for them, both male and female.

16. Overseers and Deacons

"Now the overseer must be above reproach...Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect...." (1 Timothy 3:2, 8)

There are two kinds of officers in the church. First, there are the elders, also called overseers. They are mature and instructed men whose main task is teaching, but who are also responsible for the major administrative decisions of the community. In connection with this, they have authority to enforce the apostolic commands regarding church discipline. Then, the deacons are the assistants to the elders and servants to the church. They are to handle the practical affairs that would otherwise hinder the elders in their work of prayer and preaching, such as the distribution of aid. They have no authority over the elders. The modern-day "deacon board" is unbiblical. A more biblical model would be for there to be a board of elders, and a team of deacons to carry out the decisions of this board.

Strange comments are sometimes made regarding our passage. According to some preachers and writers, it states that an officer of the church is to possess a worthy character, but it does not say that he must affirm sound doctrine. Those who demand doctrinal purity from their leaders are unloving and nitpicking Pharisees who miss the heartbeat of God. There are great problems with this interpretation of the passage, with this argument from silence, or alleged silence, and with the conclusion drawn from such an interpretation.

Suppose I am involved in a legal battle and spend two hours telling a friend about it. Since the case entails dispositions, court appearances, and much paperwork, I am in a rush to find a lawyer to represent me. My friend asks at this point, "What kind of lawyer are you looking for?" I pause for a moment and reply, "I am looking for a lawyer who will be honest with me, and who is punctual and efficient, polite, and presentable. Since I am not familiar with the law in this area, he must also be someone with a lot of patience." Now, imagine if my friend responds, "You did not mention that he must know the law. So that is unimportant?" Of course a lawyer must know the law! The whole matter is about the law! I mentioned that he must represent me in dispositions, in court, and in handling the paperwork. The entire context suggests that I am looking for an expert in the law, only that I am looking for an expert in the law who possesses other qualities that are also important to me. My friend's reaction indicates that either he has forgotten the entire context of the conversation, or that he is a tremendously stupid person, or both.

Likewise, to say that Paul's list of qualifications for elders and deacons does not require them to be sound in doctrine betrays a deficiency in simple reading comprehension, and a complete neglect of the context of the Pastoral Epistles. In these letters we find a constant emphasis on doctrine that is repeated in various ways and from all angles. There are

apostolic commands to preach the word, to maintain and transmit sound teachings, and to oppose false doctrines and false teachers. Many of these are explicit, sometimes directly applicable to the minister of the gospel, and often even to all believers.

That said, the list in fact requires sound doctrine in our elders and deacons. Paul writes that the overseers must be "able to teach." Are we to think that he means "able to teach false doctrines"? And the deacons "must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith." The main task of deacons is practical service, and so Paul does not emphasize the ability to teach "the deep truths of the faith." But notice that they must still affirm them. Those who allege that the list does not require doctrinal soundness and precision are disqualified by this very passage, at least from being elders. To say what they do about this list indicates that they do not know the primary task of the elder or overseer, and lack the ability to understand the plain statements of Scripture.

Paul reminds us of an essential principle in church order – God requires specific traits in the leaders of his people. A person is not qualified just because he is willing and available, or even ambitious, for the position. He is not qualified just because he possesses some qualities that the world considers desirable, but that are irrelevant to spiritual leadership. A sober consideration of what Paul says may lead us to the realization that many, if not most, church leaders today are not qualified to stand in their positions.

The Bible requires a minister of the gospel to be sound in both his doctrine and his character. He must be examined in both of these areas. However, if a person is not sound in doctrine, then we do not even need to consider his character – he cannot be an elder or a deacon, because he might not even be a Christian. May God raise up many among us, and may God himself become their teacher, so that they may become sound in the faith, both in their doctrine and character, and lead the church out of disrepute into glorious victory by the truth and power of Jesus Christ.

17. The Pillar of the Truth

Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14-15)

Paul calls the church "the pillar and foundation of the truth." This tells us, not what the church *must be*, but what the church *is*. The significance of this distinction will become clear later, but first we must consider whether the two metaphors are subject to misunderstandings.

Some writers worry that the metaphors "pillar" and "foundation" may give people the impression that the church is the very source and basis of truth. However, the whole of Scripture testifies against this, and so they are concerned to expound the verse in a way that avoids the false interpretation.

Thus it is said that the "pillar" metaphor is made against the background of ancient architecture. A pagan temple, for example, may include numerous ornate pillars that serve not only to support the structure, but to display the riches and glory associated with the deity. Writers appear more worried about the "foundation" metaphor, and suggest that a better translation would be "bulwark" or "buttress." That is, the church is not the very foundation of the truth, but only its protector.

The problem has been exaggerated. We are not Catholics who try to distort individual words and phrases from Scripture to justify man-made doctrines. We are Christians who respect the whole of Scripture, and read individual words and phrases against the background of the entire holy book. Scripture is a product of divine inspiration, so that individual words and phrases are indeed significant, so much so that entire doctrines may hang upon them; however, these words and phrases do not stand alone, and do not maintain their meanings in a vacuum. Still less are they subject to arbitrary interpretations imposed upon them.

The same apostle who writes that the church is the pillar of the truth also preaches that God is "not served by human hands, as if he need anything." How foolish must a person be, then, to think that the metaphor here could be twisted to mean that the church is the support of the truth in a sense that the truth would crumble if not for the church? There are some who speak as if the apostasy of men can thwart the plan of God. No, it cannot. I am surely concerned about the state of the church and the spiritual climate of the world, but only as a matter of zeal, and not of fear and worry about the final result. The truth will stand whether or not the church stands. And the church will stand whether or not there appears to be many faithful believers, since Christ said that he will build it, and that

even hell will not prevail against it. The metaphor refers to a function of the church, and not to its inherent power. There is no room for misinterpretation.

As for the idea of foundation, the word does not suggest anything like a source or originator. The foundation of a building is not the designer, builder, or creator of the building. It is only the location of which the building is placed. Neither can the metaphor suggest that the church is the foundation of the truth in the sense that the foundation of an intellectual system consists of the first principles from which the rest of the system is deduced. This is because the church itself is not any part of the contents of an intellectual system.

If the metaphor were to suggest an idea like builder or creator, or source, we would need more either from the immediate context or from the background of Scripture to compel this interpretation. This is sometimes present when the "foundation" metaphor is used elsewhere, but the context and background prevents this interpretation here. Paul instructs the Christians to behave in a manner that serves the truth. But if the church produces the truth, then what the church produces is the truth. However, Paul does not define the truth in terms of the church, but he defines the church in terms of the truth. The truth has been revealed by God, and it is fixed. Whether or not a community is the church depends on its relation to the truth.

This addresses one of the most pressing questions that Christians must consider, and they must examine their communities in light of the answer. What is the church to be? There are some who say, "What is the truth?" And their answer is, "Ask the church. It is whatever the church says it is." This is not the Christian view. Rather, we ask, "What is the church?" And we answer, "God has revealed the truth to us through the Scripture. The church is the community that affirms this truth in common, and that promotes and protects this truth about God and Jesus Christ."

It follows that any community that fails to affirm, promote, and protect the truth is not the church. If it ceases to support and display the truth like a pillar, and if it does not hold upright and stable the truth like a foundation, then it is not the church. The pillar and foundation of the truth is not what the church must be, or must strive to become, but it is what the church is. In other words, if an assembly is not a pillar and foundation of the truth, it is not a church. No matter what it does – it may bring people together in friendship, it may excel in charity, or it may advocate social justice – it is not a Christian community.

Consider two examples. There are churches that call themselves Christian assemblies, but their official position denies the inerrancy of Scripture, that the Bible is a product of divine inspiration, so that it is accurate in every detail and that it carries absolute authority. These congregations have lost all sense of truth. There is no basis to call them Christian churches. Then, there are some denominations that marry homosexuals, and formally ordain some of them as preachers. These organizations do not function as pillars of the truth, but they attempt to redefine the truth by asserting something contrary to the truth already revealed by God.

The Bible reveals the truth in fixed propositions and doctrines, and defines the church as that which functions as its pillar. These denominations reverse this in their thinking and practice – their fixed assumption is that they are the Christian church, and the truth is whatever they declare it to be, and that it is subject to modification as the opinions of men shift and alter. The sin of homosexuality is significant, and we cannot overlook the fact that these denominations condone it. But the point right now is that their policy is only a result of a more general apostasy, a prior abandonment of the faith, in that they have already turned away from the truth of divine revelation. And because they are not the promoter and protector of the truth, but rather try to invent their own doctrines according to the sentiments of the times, they are no longer Christian churches.

What this means is that all Christians should denounce these denominations and congregations that submit to their policy, and they should be considered excommunicated from Christ's kingdom. No Christian should support these denominations and churches with any of their time, money, or goodwill, and no Christian should attend their meetings as if they are attending Christian services. Of course, we may speak to these groups as non-Christian assemblies, calling them to repentance and conversion through true faith in Jesus Christ and genuine assent to the truth.

I endorse the idea that we should pursue peace with one another, and that not every doctrinal disagreement should result in an all-out brawl. However, there is a misguided tendency among Christians to seek peace by uniting around a minimum amount of truth. But since when is the faith of Jesus Christ a quest for the minimum? It is, rather, a proclamation of the whole revelation of God, the entire truth about God that he has revealed. It is a quest for the maximum, for a complete understanding, and for all the fullness of God.

It is sometimes suggested that when we consider the legitimacy of a church, we ought to ask whether or not it carries at least "the gospel," and by that the bare minimum of truth is meant. Even if bare minimum Christianity is still Christianity, it is certainly not good Christianity, and it is contrary to the spirit of the faith to support it. A bare minimum Christian, if there is such a thing, may indeed be a Christian, but let no one take him as a teacher! And a bare minimum church, if there is a such a thing, may indeed be a church, but why should anyone join himself to it?

18. The Doctrines of Demons

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. (1 Timothy 4:1)

The Holy Spirit predicts apostasy. Many who claim to follow Jesus Christ would either cease to identify themselves with him, or even as they continue to assert that they are disciples, show themselves to be liars. The Bible tells us elsewhere that if a person truly departs from apostolic Christianity, then he has never been a real disciple in the first place. This is because, in true conversion, a person's inner nature is changed so that he naturally – that is, as a natural effect of his new nature – believes and follows Jesus Christ with a sincere heart. This change of nature is entirely an act of God, which he performs in one's soul apart from the person's desire or decision, and which he subsequently sustains and causes to grow in strength and holiness. The unconverted person has an evil nature, and a person with an evil nature will not decide to change his own nature into good, since there is no good in him to make such a decision. There is a self-contradiction in the idea that an evil person can decide to be good. And even if he were willing to make this choice, he has no ability to change his own nature from evil to good. Conversion is a work of God, and the work of God stands. It follows that people who turn away from the Lord Jesus have never been his true followers. They have never been Christians, and have never been saved from sin.

The focus here is on the manifestation of apostasy, or a sign that it has occurred. Apostasy is a turning away from "the faith." Both the context and the term suggest that Paul refers to a repudiation of Christian doctrines, and this turning away from the truth corresponds to a turning toward "things taught by demons." We face two ideas that both Christians and non-Christians are often reluctant to accept. First, religion is doctrinal, and thus intellectual. Second, religion is spiritual, in that it has to do with spirits, or spiritual entities.

Religion is doctrinal and intellectual, and true religion is a matter of affirming with the mind a set of teachings revealed by divine inspiration. It is common to object that many people's doctrines are thoroughly orthodox, but their lifestyles rival that of the demons. Surely they cannot be Christians? Surely, they cannot. But the complaint errs in that most people's doctrines are not nearly as orthodox as they are given credit for, and then even where they are orthodox, their assent to these doctrines are often hypocritical, or only a matter of appearance. Christian doctrines demand holy behavior, so that true assent to a doctrine compels the behavior that the doctrine demands, and the behavior demanded is produced provided that the power is there to carry it out. This power is furnished by God through the Holy Spirit in those who truly believe. Thus true religion is doctrinal, which means that it is intellectual, and this in turn means that there is an objective aspect to it that can be examined, defined, and proclaimed.

Religion is spiritual, and in this context we mean that it has to do with spirits, or spiritual entities. Paul says that "the Spirit," or the Holy Spirit of God, predicts apostasy from the faith in express terms. The Holy Spirit is an intelligent person who could speak to men in words. Paul also refers to the doctrines of demons. Demons are evil spirits that seduce men, so that they would turn away from the truth and follow false doctrines instead. If Christians are eager to affirm that the truth has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, although many of them minimize his continuing work in the world, they nevertheless seldom associate the spread of false doctrines with the design and action of demons. There is the claim that demons are restricted in their activities due to the triumph of Jesus Christ, who as Paul writes to the Colossians, has "disarmed the powers and authorities." However, this had already occurred when the apostles encountered overt demonic opposition as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, and here he tells Timothy that the demons are still teaching people false doctrines. That Christ has disarmed all the powers of darkness means that his chosen people are set free from spiritual deception and slavery as we proclaim his victory. It does not mean that all traces of their existence have disappeared. In fact, the Bible tells us that the devil still acts like a roaring lion, and some people are enslaved by him to do his will. A minister who is allergic to the present reality of demons is like a squeamish pest exterminator. The demons have not retired, but perhaps he should.

Paul lists two specific things that the demonic doctrines entail: "They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods." As some writers have pointed out, it would be an anachronism to say that Paul has Gnosticism in mind, which did not come to maturity until the second century. However, it is possible that he is referring to something like it, or a precursor of the heresy. In any case, it is unnecessary to ascertain the precise background, since Paul's exposition is sufficient for us to derive the doctrine, even without the historical context. The false teachers order people to abstain from certain foods, and the apostle counters this by saying that "everything God created is good," and is therefore appropriate for consumption if received with thanksgiving.

Now, I am outspoken against the insane notion that everything that Paul asserts is a reaction to a contrary false doctrine, practice, or tendency in or around his readers. When Paul urges his readers to love one another, it does not necessarily mean that the believers have a special problem with discord or hatred. It is a general teaching that can be asserted at all times. So just because Paul counters the false doctrines with the reminder that everything God created is good does not necessarily mean that these false doctrines teach that God did not create everything, or that some of the things he created are not good, or that the physical body or matter is inherently evil. It is possible that the false doctrines teach this, but the text does not say this, nor is it a necessary implication of the text. Nevertheless, these false doctrines appear to arise from the idea that abstinence from such things as marriage and certain foods is either necessary for salvation, or at least required for an enhanced spirituality.

It might surprise some people that Paul condemns these doctrines with such harsh terms. Perhaps they would suppose that for a doctrine to be called demonic, it must be

something on the level of a call to murder one's parents to attain eternal life, or to burn one's children to obtain favor with God. Certainly, these would be doctrines of demons. But when a doctrine tells us that there is some ceremony or some restriction that is foreign to the apostolic teaching, that if it is observed, would bring us closer to God, or that if it is not observed would prevent us from salvation, it is putting before us someone or something other than Jesus Christ to rule our conscience, when that is the exclusive right of our Lord. Only God has the authority to define for us what is fundamentally right or wrong.

When Satan told Eve that, although God said not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that she should eat from it anyway, and that no harm would come to her as a result, we can call that a demonic doctrine, since it was the devil himself speaking to her. On that occasion, the doctrine persuaded Eve to pursue freedom against a divine restriction. It was to set her conscience free to act against an explicit divine command. The widespread rebellion against explicit biblical prohibitions, both in the church and in the world, testifies to the effectiveness of this demonic doctrine. But the devil can seduce people's unconverted religious sentiments in other ways. If our supposition is correct, here the demonic doctrine suggests that simple faith in Christ and thankful enjoyment of God's creation is not sufficient. Rather, to attain the spiritual heights, a person must observe certain ceremonies, regard certain days as special and holy, or refuse natural bodily appetites. Then he will be saved. Then he will become an elite believer. This is a demonic doctrine. Although it appears to advocate discipline and a religious attitude, it is in fact a radical challenge to the authority of God and an attack on the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The tactic differs from Satan's temptation against Eve, but its essence and its result are the same.

Doctrines of demons overrun some supposedly Christian communities. Even this particular manifestation of it is pervasive, that is, doctrines that subvert the Lord's exclusive authority over the conscience, and the definitions of right and wrong. When they appear in churches, these doctrines almost always claim the moral high ground, and present themselves as spiritually superior ways to follow God. To offer only one of many possible examples, and one that closely relates to the context of our passage, there are those who advocate a "Christian" vegetarianism on the basis that it is spiritually and morally superior. It is impossible to establish this on a biblical foundation.

The question is not whether the doctrine has any merit, but it is how strongly believers are ready to condemn it. According to the apostle, we must not regard it as excess piety or mere fanaticism, but we must declare it a demonic doctrine. When a writer produces a book that advances this position, we should recognize that either a demon inspired him to write it, or at least acknowledge that the doctrine is of demonic origin, rather than to attribute it solely to mundane human errors. How many ministers would say this? Paul writes, "If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ." Many ministers will do little to nothing to combat such a doctrine, or to denounce it in harsh terms, because they are not good ministers. If a Christian wishes to slaughter a sheep, or ten, let him do it with confidence. If a Christian wants to eat a cow and the cow's entire family, let him do it with thanksgiving. And if this offends you, the

problem is not with the doctrine or with me, but it is in you. To the unclean, all things are unclean, not because the things God created are unclean in themselves, but because the person is unclean, and possesses not freedom in Jesus Christ. But to the person whose heart has been cleansed by faith, I say, "Kill and eat!"

19. Spit on Christ to Spite the Greeks

If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. 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 Timothy 4:6-8)

There are certain foundational principles in the Christian system on which the whole structure rests. There is one God. This God is a unity of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Man was created good, in the image of God, but he fell from his initial station because of sin, which is a transgression of God's law. To redeem his people, that is, those individuals that he has chosen to save from among sinful humanity, God the Son took upon himself a human nature, in order that he might be the sole mediator between God and men. He is the only way to God and to salvation. Those who are saved by him are not only bound to him, but they are also liberated in him, so that no other person, no other religion or philosophy, and no man-made system of rituals and regulations can exercise any authority over their souls. He is the true shepherd, and the sheep hear his voice. The voice of another they will not follow, nor are they obligated to pay any attention to it.

A good minister of Jesus Christ continually reminds people of these foundational principles of the gospel and warns them against false doctrines. Since false doctrines tend to contradict the basic truths, the most effective way to protect believers from deception is to reinforce the prominent themes of the Christian faith over and over again, on various occasions and from various angles. Then, when a threat arises, believers will either detect it by themselves, or they will quickly recognize the danger when a faithful minister draws attention to it. The doctrines of demons that Paul has in mind in this letter include the prohibition against marriage and abstinence from certain foods, probably on a religious basis. But this is against the very basic truths of God's creation, the goodness of this creation, the sufficiency of Christ, and the believer's entire dependence on Christ for his forgiveness, justification, and free access before God.

The minister has no hope of building up believers in the faith and protecting them from seducing doctrines if he himself has a weak grasp of the gospel. So he must be a person who is "trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine" (ESV). Then, Paul tells Timothy, "Train yourself to be godly." This also suggests the vigorous and persistent study of sound doctrine, since the apostle states this as a contrast against "myths" and "tales." Avoid nonsense. Pursue truth. This is an essential principle for the minister of the gospel. This is the way he must live his life. It is his motto.

By referring to the pursuit of godliness as training, Paul employs the imagery of an athlete, although he is not talking about physical training, but rather applies the concept to spiritual training. Commentators like to assert that the apostle does not belittle physical exercise, only that he is asserting the greater importance of spiritual exercise. This seems to be reading into the text something that they would like Paul to acknowledge rather than what he actually says. His statement might not belittle physical training in itself, but physical training is not mentioned by itself. Rather, it is referred to as a contrast against spiritual training, so that the apostle indeed belittles physical training at least in relation to spiritual training. A paper cup is of some value, but a mansion is of great value. A paper cup is not of zero value, or even negative value, but when compared to a mansion, the statement does not do much to commend the paper cup.

The Bible makes a sharp distinction, and often a sharp contrast, between the physical and the spiritual. It also pounds on the idea, again and again, that the spiritual is more important than the physical. Certainly, you can perform physical training for the honor of God. The Bible teaches that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and it follows that you should care for it, so that you may serve God with your body and make the faith of Jesus Christ reputable. That said, you can honor God with physical training until you are blue in the face, but Paul still says that spiritual training is more valuable. It is different. It is superior. In sharp contrast against mere physical training, spiritual training has value "for all things."

There are some Christians who despise this distinction, this contrast, and this prioritization between the spiritual and the physical, because they regard this way of thinking as a product of Greek thought. Now, I cannot care less what the Greeks thought, or what people think what the Greeks thought (since they often misrepresent the Greeks) – Greek or not, the Bible says what it says right here. If you say that the Greeks agreed, then so much the better for the Greeks, and so much the worse for you if you disagree, but it does not change what the Bible says.

Theologians often talk about how Greek philosophy has distorted Christian theology. However, they have become so obsessed with this that, for a long time, the assumption that Greek contamination pervades our thinking has itself become a force that shapes the theological thinking of many people. The assumption that Greek philosophy has distorted Christian theology – this assumption itself, and the obsession to identify and correct this distortion – has in turn distorted Christian theology. In their campaign to blast away anything that they perceive as Greek, they have also bulldozed over actual biblical teachings. At times they have ended up teaching the very opposite of what the Bible asserts. They have in mind the things that they think characterize Greek philosophy, and then simply assume that the Bible teaches the opposite, even when the explicit statements of the Bible affirm what they think is Greek contamination. Far from biblical, their theology is a product of anti-Greek philosophy. They have created their own unbiblical tradition, perhaps one that enables them to sound a righteous gong while conveniently excusing them from rejecting clear biblical teachings.

For example, there is the assumption that Greek philosophy teaches that there is a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, and that the body is inherently evil. And from the idea that the body is evil, or at least worthless, certain principles are inferred that cannot be reconciled with the biblical view. In contrast, they claim, Hebrew thought maintains that the human person is a unity, and there should be no sharp distinction between the soul and the body. One theologian mocked the supposedly Greek teaching by calling it the "ghost in a machine" theory. But then he himself brought up the question as to how one can still remain a human person after death. He said, "It is a mystery."

This pathetic answer, of course, can be used to defend any view at all. It ends all arguments not by answering the challenge, but by throwing the whole debate into a black hole. But it is not a mystery – he was simply wrong. The Bible says that a human person consists of soul and body, and the defining element is the soul. Jesus told his disciples not to fear men, who could only kill the body, but to fear God, who could torment both the body and the soul. He said that what enters into a body through the mouth passes through the body and exits it as waste. So no food is inherently unclean. But what comes out of a person, from his heart or soul, is that which makes him unclean, because from it can come murder, adultery, idolatry, and so on. Paul writes that, for the Christian, although the body decays, the inner man is renewed every day. Both Paul and Peter note that women should not make themselves beautiful by adorning the body, but by adorning the soul – that is, by a meek and quiet spirit, which would admittedly exhibit its qualities through good deeds. Peter refers to his body as a tent or house that he would soon leave behind. This might not be the same as "ghost in a machine," but perhaps we cannot expect anything closer in first-century language. In making a point about faith, James says that without the spirit, the body is dead. And here Paul says that the physical is distinguished from the spiritual, and the spiritual is more valuable.

Theologians of the Reformed tradition, like the one just mentioned, often boast of bringing a corrective to Greek distortions in Christian theology, but they inflict much greater damage by their insistence to teach the opposite of what they think constitutes Greek thought. In shrugging off as a mystery something that cannot be reconciled with Scripture, this theologian was willing to sacrifice the clarity and the certainty of the Christian revelation to protect his prejudice and tradition. This is not better than Greek contamination. (I would say that the rejection of divine timelessness as a Greek influence is itself a result, not of competent biblical exegesis or sound theological thinking, but of an anti-Greek reaction that has resulted in a denial of biblical doctrine. The contaminant is not Greek thinking, but anti-Greek thinking, neither of which has anything to do with what the Bible says.)

Just as few verses earlier, Paul writes, "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected." This is supposed to be one of the biblical verses that refute the "sacred vs. secular" distinction. And from this rejection of the distinction, a host of other ideas have been articulated – including justification for capitalism, democracy, sports, movies, and just about anything else that one wishes to engage in, supposedly, "for the honor of God" in the process of fulfilling the cultural mandate. This line of thought is common in Reformed theology, and is touted as a corrective against much abuse in doctrine and

practice, including how believers regard their occupations and daily activities. While it has indeed been a corrective in some cases, it has also created a number of problems and strange applications. Here I will not argue whether or not the biblical doctrine ought to be expressed as a denial of the "sacred vs. secular" distinction, since this entails a cloud of confusion that cannot be presently resolved. But whether or not the doctrine is sound as stated like this, let us consider some of the inferences that have been drawn from this idea.

The doctrine is commonly associated with the priesthood of all believers, a doctrine that I heartily affirm and commend. But not all applications are legitimate. One scholar writes, "Since all believers are priests, this means that all jobs are holy." This is false and dangerous. If all jobs are holy, then it would be holy for believers to be prostitutes, assassins, and drug dealers. If it is said that true believers will never participate in these occupations, then the doctrine no longer stands, but it has become, "Since all believers are priests, this means that they will not accept unholy occupations." This destroys the initial claim that arises from the priesthood of all believers. It is a false inference from the doctrine.

A milder claim, also common, is that because of the priesthood of all believers, we can honor God in whatever situation we find ourselves, and one occupation is not more holy or honorable than another. Even preaching is not superior to other occupations. Preaching is not more important than, say, accounting or construction. However, the same theologians would insist that whether one does accounting or construction is a matter of indifference, or at least of individual preference, but in another context would also insist that all believers must preach the gospel, and that preaching is not a matter of indifference or preference. You can do accounting or not do accounting, but you must preach the gospel. But if accounting is just as holy, just as important, just as honoring to God as preaching, then why not just do more accounting? If the reply is that Scripture commands preaching and not accounting, then is this not an admission that Scripture has made a distinction between the two? Whether we call the distinction "sacred vs. secular" is one aspect of the debate, but that there is a huge distinction is not subject to dissent, unless one wishes to betray his allegiance to human tradition over divine revelation. Now, there are hundreds of thousands of other examples. If this does not destroy the theory of those who oppose the "sacred vs. secular" distinction, at least it seems to destroy almost all of their applications of the theory. It appears that even if Scripture endorses a doctrine resembling what they assert, they have exaggerated its application.

Their way of thinking has produced much Scripture-twisting, and has inflicted much damage to Christian doctrine and practice. For example, Paul writes to the Colossians, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." This is unacceptable to those who think that such distinctions should not be made if all of God's creation is good, if all believers are priests, and if all of life is to be considered "sacred." So one writer asserts that the distinction between "things above" and "earthly things" is not spatial, but ethical. This is what he must say in order to maintain his tradition, but the passage does not allow this interpretation. Paul defines "above" as

the place "where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" – it is a spatial reference. Even if one regards the "right hand" as symbolic, the ascension is not symbolic. In asserting that the reference is merely ethical and not spatial, the writer in effect attacks a central doctrine of the Christian faith, that is, the physical ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, and thus commits blasphemy by implication. This is how dangerous a stubborn insistence on this false doctrine, or at least a false application of a true doctrine, can be.

Paul is indeed saying that we should focus on things "above." As with the verse on physical training, some might say that he nevertheless does not belittle earthly things. But the apostle disappoints them, since he adds, "not on earthly things." Now, whether Paul is making a "sacred vs. secular" distinction is something that I do not care to discuss in this place, but he is making some kind of distinction, and it is one that is unacceptable among some circles today. I urge them to reconsider, and restore this biblical teaching into their theology, lifestyle, and preaching.

20. The Minister's Example

Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:11-16)

An older man recently referred to me and my wife as "kids." He did not intend this to be derogatory or condescending, but it reflected the way he perceived us due to the age difference, just as I might call someone much younger than me the same thing. Although I have been teaching people of his age since I was sixteen, after so many years the difference remains large enough that someone of his age would still think of me as a kid. Timothy was not a child or a teenager. He could have been older than me, but he was still considered young in the context of his culture and relative to some of the people in his congregation, so that perhaps they found it difficult to take direction from him or to accept his authority. We cannot know if Timothy in fact faced this problem, but the apostle considered it a possibility.

Paul's comments are instructive, and suggest applications that are useful beyond the immediate context. When he says earlier that a church leader should not be a new convert, this has no necessary relationship with the age of a person. An old man can be a new convert, and it is possible for a relatively young person to be a seasoned believer. Before other considerations, however legitimate or needful, it is the truth that counts. He does not tell Timothy to speak through an older person, or through someone that the community naturally looks up to due to age, education, wealth, or some such thing, but to take it upon himself to "command and teach these things." As for the resistance or suspicion that might arise because of his youth, this is not to be overcome solely by a stern rebuke against prejudice, although a church leader certainly could challenge cultural assumptions that hinder ministry. Rather, Paul tells Timothy to prove himself by setting an example in conduct and by devoting himself to doctrine.

The Bible's insistence that a minister must "set an example" should not be reduced to another cliché. It does not resonate with the stupid slogan that "actions speak louder than words." If actions speak louder than words, then I want the person who believes this to shut his mouth and, without words, say it to me by his actions instead. If actions speak louder than words, then tell me this claim by actions, not by words. This saves him from being a hypocrite, and also allows me to ignore him in peace and quiet. In any case, even

if he were to punch me in the face, without uttering a word of explanation, I would not derive from his action the proposition that actions speak louder than words. Those who are loudest about the loudness of actions often have no notable actions to show for it. They just assume that this is what they should say. The popularity of this slogan, in fact, illustrates the need for sound doctrine, since it is due to careless thinking that such an unbiblical statement has been accepted as proper Christian teaching.

Both actions and words are important, but greater precision is needed so that we can grasp how they are important. Contrary to the slogan, actions do not speak at all in the way that words do, so that actions can never speak "louder" than words as if they can be compared on the same scale. It is true that actions can "speak" in a purely figurative sense, but the speaking is in fact not done until the points that the actions are supposed to make are put into words. Nevertheless, these statements would be interpretations of the actions. They are not the actions themselves, nor are they statements that necessarily arise from the actions. Whether true or false, valid or invalid, they are verbal interpretations of things that in themselves do not speak and that do not convey any information.

True words are true even if the speaker's actions do not correspond. True words impose moral obligations upon the hearers to assent and to obey even if the person who speaks these words is a hypocrite. It is common for preachers to warn us that if we do not walk in love or live a holy life, then "no one" will believe our gospel, and some even say that no one should. This is the world's wisdom, and the Bible is directly against it. Jesus told his own disciples that they should do what the Pharisees said when they spoke in line with Moses, but should not follow their example, since they were hypocrites (Matthew 23:1-3). The truth itself carries the power to compel assent and the authority to impose obligation. It is rather pretentious of people to suppose that this power and authority rest on their conduct.

Still, our actions are important, only that they are not important for the communication of information, and they are not necessary for persuasion. Rather, first, it is important that our conduct is consistent with our doctrine because this is our moral obligation. The gospel is true whether or not we conform to it, but if we are true disciples of Jesus Christ, then we will also strive to follow his commands and teachings. Second, although our actions do nothing to convey truth, they provide illustrations to the truth that we convey by our words, although since actions cannot speak, these illustrations themselves must be pointed out and explained by our words. Third, when our conduct is consistent with our doctrine, this serves as authentication to the genuineness of our own faith and ministry. It is not necessary to authenticate the faith of Jesus Christ, which is true no matter what we do, but it serves to authenticate us as his disciples.

Fourth, although our conduct has no necessary relationship to the truth of the Christian faith, there are many people who would make such a connection in their minds, and so when our conduct is consistent with our doctrine, it helps to convince the irrational. Again, it is a gross exaggeration to say that "no one" would believe our doctrine when our conduct does not match, since the Spirit of God is not impotent, and the gospel – not our holy conduct – is the power of God for salvation. By the grace of God at work in the

minds of his chosen ones, not everyone is stupid. Why would the inconsistencies of Christians prevent me from believing in the gospel? The Bible itself teaches that believers are not perfect. I saw this even as I read the Bible as an infant. It is not some complicated and hidden truth. And why would I stumble because of some scandal in the church, or because some famous minister commits fraud or adultery? It is entirely consistent with what the Bible predicts, so what is there to stumble over? Why would I doubt the Christian faith when what it tells me would happen, actually happens? But some people are stupid, and it is our obligation to make sure that we do not allow our actions to become stumbling blocks to them, however irrational it is for them to perceive them as such.

Meanwhile, we must not tolerate this illegitimate connection between conduct and truth. If we allow it to perpetuate, we implicitly grant people permission to disbelieve or abandon the gospel on the basis of our failures. Instead, we must echo Jesus' policy, that is, hypocrites are condemnable, but truth is truth even when it comes from their mouths, and the moral obligation imposed by truth remains in full force. In our preaching and teaching, we must expose the false connection. As long as Jesus Christ is not a hypocrite, the gospel is true, and is to be believed and obeyed. And if you stumble because of another person's failure, not only are you stupid, but you remain culpable for violating the truth of the gospel.

Although our conduct says nothing about the truth of our doctrine, it says something about us, and about our own commitment to the doctrine we espouse. And although even a hypocrite, if he speaks the truth, must be heeded, as a hypocrite he is not qualified to lead the church. Paul says that if Timothy seems to be young to some of the people, then he should show himself to be mature, and capable of leading God's people and giving them authoritative direction. There is no problem with the idea of a young minister, but whether young or old, a person who assumes the position must show that he has been taught and transformed by the Ancient of Days.

We have focused our attention on conduct, but only to correct a common misunderstanding about its relation to doctrine and to ministry. The apostle also instructs his son in the faith to closely watch his doctrine and to diligently develop his gift for ministry. Again, if there is a tendency in some people to look down on the minister because of his youth, he is to prove himself by his maturity in character, his dedication and competence in the ministry of the word, and his continual progress. The work of the Spirit in a man is God's own testimony that the minister is legitimate, and this work of God is evidenced by conduct, doctrine, and spiritual endowment.

He says that the gift was given to him through a prophetic message when some elders laid their hands on him. Many Christians no longer permit the prophetic, although they have no biblical warrant for this. The dread of deception should not be relieved by denying spiritual manifestations, but by testing all claims to their occurrences. The Bible is sufficient to do this. A lack of emphasis on spiritual gifts, which is really a lack of dependence on God's Spirit, explains the powerlessness in most ministers and churches. Ordination is an empty gesture, a formality that signals mere human recognition with no

divine power to accompany it. A total destruction of all charismatic tendencies would, of course, eliminate all false claims of supernatural power, but it does not demonstrate a faithfulness to Scripture. Paul commands us to covet spiritual gifts, the powerful manifestations and endowments of God's Spirit. Nowadays many Christians seem to think that it is carnal to desire spiritual gifts, as if the Bible itself teaches this. How far have we fallen! I covet spiritual power, because the Bible commands it, and because I recognize that I am entirely inadequate in myself. I need the power of the Holy Spirit, and I want people's faith to rest in God's power instead of my natural talents.

God is merciful and generous. Although some of us are hardened by tradition and unbelief, he still give gifts to his church, if not by prophetic utterances or the laying on of hands, then by the direct action of the Spirit, so that his word may be spread abroad and his people edified. If God wants to do something, and if he wants to do it a certain way, then all our traditions cannot stop it. The church cannot stop it. Scholars cannot stop it. Denominational leaders cannot stop it. False creeds, traditions, and theologies cannot stop it. He will do what he wants to do. Yet people ought to take care lest they find themselves fighting against God for the sake of their traditions, and in order to hide their insecurities, jealousies, and deficiencies.

There is a wider application to all of this. That is, when someone looks down on you because of your age, race, appearance, level of formal education, social or economic background, or some other thing that should have no necessary relevance to your competence as a minister of the gospel, the biblical answer is to prove yourself by exhibiting godly character and conduct. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Throw yourself entirely into improvement in these things, and into the work of preaching and teaching.

You may be tempted to threaten people into giving you superficial respect, but if you are satisfied with that, then you are indeed the spiritual and moral loser that they think you are, and it just proves that their prejudice against you is after all justified. Perhaps they harbor their prejudice because of people like you. You might threaten them into silence, but not appreciation and acceptance. You cannot fool all of them. They will know that you just want to silence them without admitting faults and without making improvements, and they will despise you even more in their hearts. It is time to stop complaining and making excuses. If their prejudice is unfounded, then admonish them, but also contradict them by exhibiting excellence in your conduct, attitude, and doctrine.

21. Intelligent Charity, Principled Compassion

The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to. So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.

If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need. (1 Timothy 5:5-6, 9-16)

The ancient church was intelligent and principled in the distribution of aid. Perhaps it lacked the bureaucracies of the modern world, but tediousness should not be confused with developed management. Paul's instructions concerning the widows show that the early church appreciated several essential factors in the effective administration of charity. There were clear and precise terms to define individuals who qualified to receive aid. Need alone was insufficient to constitute a legitimate claim to the resources of the church – it was significant that the apostle placed much emphasis on whether the people fulfilled their responsibilities as measured by the precepts of the gospel.

The fact that there was a list of widows who qualified to receive aid implies deliberateness and organization. They had a system of giving that entailed much more than handing out money and supplies to anonymous individuals waiting in a line at random hours. Further, the terms were much stricter than those of any contemporary church charity that we have encountered, in that they demanded an established record of holy conduct. Those who did not satisfy the requirements were outright excluded even if they appeared to be in need. If the church made some exceptions for very special cases, certainly they were exceptions that proved the rule.

Those who did not qualify to receive aid as widows might have obtained some form of assistance on another basis – perhaps as individuals who needed help to survive. However, even if this happened, it would have been occasional, spontaneous, and temporary, and insufficient to maintain one's livelihood. Otherwise, the entire system of charity to widows would have been pointless. This program for supporting the widows arose from the church's intent to exercise compassion with intelligence and integrity. The restrictions were designed to both limit the burden on the church, as well as to prevent any scandal that would bring the name of Christ into disrepute. True Christian ethics always places God's honor above the very lives of the men and women that we are supposed to assist. This is an inflexible principle that must govern all our charitable works without any exception or hesitation.

This was a main reason for refusing aid to licentious young widows. Paul provided no other route for them to receive support from the church. They were forced to remarry and settle down, or starve to death. Unlike the modern church, ancient believers refused to sponsor sinful living in the name of compassion. This is shocking to contemporary humanistic sentiments, whether inside or outside of the church, but it is not a dubious inference from an isolated passage. The apostle also commands elsewhere, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." There he provides no other way for such a man to survive. If a man can work but will not work, the church is not to support him with money and supplies. The man will then either be forced to work (if appropriate, the church can even hire him), in which case he will not starve, or he will remain idle and die, in which case it would be a case of suicide.

Scripture demands every person to assume his own responsibility before he can receive aid from the church. A man who can work, must work. The same thinking applies here, as the apostle says, "But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives." We can keep her alive with food and shelter, but if she wallows in worldliness, then she is already "dead" in a deeper sense. She is a walking corpse. When a person chooses to kill himself, albeit slowly, we can only delay it for so long, but eventually he will succeed. The church incurs no guilt in such cases.

Children must support parents who are in need. Nevertheless, when this is necessary, it presupposes some failure in the parents. This is because Paul writes elsewhere, "After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." That is, children should not have to save or provide for their parents, but parents should be able to sustain themselves their whole lives and still have an inheritance left for their children when they die. Instead of passing on debts and burdens from generation to generation, it is better to pass on savings and possessions. This is the ideal, but it does not always happen. And when the parents are unable to provide for themselves, the children are to support them.

Paul's instructions would prevent most people from cheating the system, or to exploit the kindness of Christians. A widow could have lied about her age, but it would have been much harder to counterfeit an established reputation for faithfulness to one's husband and "all kinds of good deeds." Again, it must be emphasized that if widows who do not

qualify are nevertheless included on the list, we would render pointless the apostle's demands. Since respect for divine inspiration means that we must not ignore his instructions, then neither can these demands be bypassed or relaxed. When the world defines compassion so differently, and when it favors human life and comfort so much more than God's honor, it takes courage and obedience to implement this sort of program in the church. Humanistic charity helps someone just because he is a fellow man and not because of God's command. If we are acting on the basis of God's command, then we will do what he actually says, and that is to exclude unqualified widows and to allow idle men to starve.

Sometimes people think that we have advanced very much in thought and intelligence, and also in our ethical standards. But this is based more on arrogance and misconception than truth. It would be a mistake to suppose that the ancient church was unsophisticated, and that the modern church possesses superior principles to regulate the management of charitable aid. No, insofar as it followed the approach set forth by the apostle, the church exercised intelligence without tedious bureaucracies, and it administered its resources according to the principles of the gospel, always with a view to honor the name of Christ in all that it does. The modern church has sometimes slipped into the humanistic trap of caring more about meeting the material needs of the people, and has forgotten to enforce principles of character and responsibility that arise from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

22. Ministry as Occupation

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." (1 Timothy 5:17-18)

Scripture defines the gospel ministry as work, and the preacher as a worker. Referring to the ministry of his disciples, Jesus says in Matthew 10, "the worker is worth his keep," and in Luke 10, "the worker deserves his wages." Paul echoes this way of thinking in our passage. And when he writes on this subject in a letter to the Corinthians, he illustrates this point by comparing the minister to one who "serves as a soldier," or who "plants a vineyard," or who "tends a flock," or who "plows" or "threshes." He even uses the image of a priest who receives food from the altar (1 Corinthians 9). In other words, the ministry is an occupation in its own right, and it must be regarded as such in any discussion about ministry and wages. One who works in the ministry, regardless of the way he is viewed by the state or the church, is an employed person.

Since the ministry is an occupation, the minister must be paid for his work. The same passages that define the ministry as work, as an occupation, also inseparably associate this fact with the right of the minister to receive hospitality, food, shelter, and wages. Paul is explicit about this: "The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14). Just as an accountant makes his living from accounting, or a chef makes his living from cooking, a minister equally makes his living from performing the work of ministry, especially preaching. Since ministry is an occupation, money paid to the minister is considered a wage.

By definition, a wage is something owed rather than voluntarily donated. It is not charity. Since the money paid to the minister is a wage, this means that it is something *owed* to the one who works by those who receive the benefit of the work. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul refers to the preacher's *right* to receive material compensation for his work. From the perspective of the minister, it is a right. From the perspective of those who benefit from his ministry, it is a debt.

Although the biblical principle that a worker deserves his wages applies to all legitimate occupations, there is a difference when it comes to the ministry. Outside of the ministry, this principle is implemented by human agreement. If the one who receives the benefit of the work has never agreed to hire a worker or to pay him, then the worker cannot generate such a debt by performing the work anyway. In contrast, the debt owed to a minister arises not by human agreement, but by a divine command that transcends it. When Jesus sent his disciples to preach, and when Paul preached the gospel to people, those who received the benefit of their ministry never agreed beforehand to pay them for

their work. Indeed, it would be impossible to secure a human agreement for wages from those they planned to evangelize before they evangelized them. The debt was generated solely because the work was done for their benefit. Therefore, the minister has not only an equal claim to a wage as workers in other occupations, but a superior claim to it.

Since a wage is owed to the preacher, those who fail or refuse to pay him are thieves and robbers, defrauders, oppressors, and sinners. God's curse is upon them. As James writes, "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you." The money that you save by neglecting to pay the preacher testifies against you, and screams out your sin to the Lord day and night. The minister might have to take another job outside of the ministry because of your covetousness and oppression – his every ounce of effort, his every drop of sweat, his every sigh is a testimony of your guilt. The Lord counts every tear his wife sheds against you. He curses you for every pang of hunger his children feel. It is a wicked thing that you do, and the Lord promises to punish you because of your cruelty and hard-heartedness. Even greater is your condemnation if you attempt to persuade others that a preacher should always work without pay.

Sometimes covetous church members and self-righteous leaders seize upon Paul's example, in that he ministered without charge. However, any reader of even minimal competence should perceive that this is the glaring exception that proves the rule. This is because the place where he explains the exception is also the place where he asserts most strongly and in the greatest detail the right of the minister to obtain material support (1 Corinthians 9).

First, he explained to the Corinthians that his policy of preaching without charge was the forgoing of a right. That is, he had the right to receive payment but did not exercise this right. If it was a right that he did not exercise, then it was a right that he could have exercised. Thus the Corinthians indeed owed him, but he pardoned the debt. Second, if it was his right to receive payment, then he was the only one who could refuse payment. It was not up to the Corinthians to withhold from him. Third, he said that "the Lord's brothers and Cephas" exercised this right. The exception was not universally practiced even among the apostles. Fourth, this policy of refusing payment was in effect toward only certain congregations. For example, he accepted money from the Philippians, and the language in his letter to them indicates that he did so at least twice, since it says that they sent him aid "again and again."

Fifth, he was clear in his reasons for declining payment from the Corinthians and certain other congregations. When the reasons did not apply, then the exception did not apply. He said that he did not exercise his rights when to exercise them would have hindered the gospel. And the reasons it might have hindered the gospel was because of their immaturity, bad attitude, and lack of discernment. Perhaps there were some who would have become suspicious of his motives. This would have distracted them from hearing the message of the gospel. Or, perhaps some would have tried to place Paul under their control if he had accepted payment from them. In contrast, the Philippians considered themselves partners with Paul in the spread of the gospel, repeatedly sending money and supplies to him. They had a right understanding of the nature of the work and of their

relationship with the preacher. By all indications, Paul did not accept payment from some people because he considered them either unbelievers or believers who suffered from retarded development. In fact, Paul's ministry to them was a case of charity. You do not ask retarded people to pay you – if possible, you help them without charge.

It is true that Jesus said to his disciples, "Freely you have received, freely give." However, immediately after this, he told them not to bring any money or extra supplies, because "the worker is worth his keep." The statement concerned how they were to dispense the message and the powers of the gospel, and not whether they could accept material support from the people. That is, Jesus instructed them to perform their ministry "freely," but at the same time to expect all their needs to be supplied by the people who received the benefit of their work. His point was not that the disciples should refuse hospitality and payment, but that they must not demand compensation for each unit of work done or for each instance of ministry.

It is a prescription for how a person should approach the work of ministry. The statement, "Freely you have received, freely give," was made right after the commission to preach, heal, and cast out demons, and again, right before the instruction to expect those who received the ministry to pay for everything. In other words, Peter could not say to someone who had a demon, "I have received power from Christ to cast out this demon, but you must pay me this amount of money, or I will not do it." No, he must cast out the demon without charge, but afterward, the person who was set free was morally obligated to compensate Peter for his work. In doing so, he would not be only supporting Peter, but he would have testified by his action that he endorsed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Suppose someone comes to me and say, "What must I do to be saved?" I must not reply, "I know how you can be saved. Pay me this amount of money and I will tell you, but if you do not pay me, I will let you go to hell." No, I must preach the gospel to this person freely, without consideration as to whether I will obtain any material reward. My responsibility is to teach him the truth, and to do it without favoritism, withholding nothing. His responsibility is to recognize me as a messenger from God who brings him good news that can save his soul, and then to offer me his material support. As Paul writes, "If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?" and "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor." Whether he does his part or not, I will do my part. If he is retarded, then I will forgo my rights for the sake of the gospel. Nevertheless, this does not relieve him of his responsibility before God.

Clearly, all of this means that it is possible to cheat the minister of his rightful wages, and this is often what happens. But God is faithful. He will meet all our needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. He will vindicate his servants, and curse those who rob and oppress them. Therefore, pay your ministers. If they perform their work well, pay them well, especially if they work hard at preaching and teaching.

To those who work in the ministry, you should feel no shame in accepting financial support from believers. If possible, the amount of support should be sufficient to sustain

your entire family and ministry. By God's command, this is your right and their obligation. In making your living from the work of the gospel, at least as much as possible, you are following the example of all the apostles, including Paul, and also of the Lord Jesus, who according to Luke, received support from a group of women. The amount of money involved must have been considerable, as it was sufficient to sustain the living and traveling expenses of at least thirteen people (Luke 8:3). This does not necessarily mean that all their money came from these women, but the point is that they accepted funds from supporters, and that they took in enough to meet the needs of more than a dozen men. In fact, they had enough money to require a money bag (John 12:6), and enough to give some of it to the poor (it seems the disciples considered this as routine; John 13:29), and even enough for Judas to steal from it without being discovered by anyone (at least at first, since it seems reasonable to assume that the other disciples would have reacted if they had known; John 12:6), except the Lord, who knew his true nature since the beginning (John 6:64, 70).

23. Scandals and Discipline

Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. (1 Timothy 5:19-20)

The details of this story elude me, but I think I have the gist of it. Some church members saw their preacher enter a bar and became upset about it. Those of you who are accustomed to using "everything God created is good" to justify all your activities and associations might not understand this, since you do things like this all the time and can perceive nothing amiss here. But some of us also believe with Paul that "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not" (1 Corinthians 10:23, KJV). Nevertheless, these church members were beyond curious, and assumed that the preacher was up to no good. Later it was discovered that the preacher entered the establishment with a guitar, went on the stage and sang a few gospel songs. His performance so moved the audience that some professed faith in Christ, and some were drawn back to the faith from their apostasy. Jesus taught us to judge not according to the appearance, but to make a righteous judgment (John 7:24). Some people think that they are God's watchdogs, but they are just busybodies who judge others' good works by their own evil intentions.

Christians love scandals. They love to find out about them and to talk about them. Rather than being students of the word of God, they enjoy becoming experts on who has said or done what to whom. Of course they lament the scandals, the false doctrines, and the moral failures of others. And how much they enjoy the lament! What an emotional outlet! What a marvelous way to express righteous indignation! What a shortcut to a feeling of sainthood! There must be a profitable market for Christian gossip tabloids. I am out of touch with the talebearers club – maybe they already exist, at least in the form of web sites.

Christians love scandals, because they are bored with the gospel, and because they prefer to achieve a sense of righteousness by looking at the failures of others than to trust in Jesus Christ and to obey his commandments. Some of them publish books and web sites that are almost entirely dedicated to reporting current scandals and to dispensing their opinions about them. And they call that doing apologetics. It does not matter whether the scandals pertain to religion and doctrine, politics, economics, education, history, or science – they love them all. Nothing excites them more than a new heresy, or the downfall of a religious or political figure. They enjoy nothing more than to discuss how another person has blasphemed the Lord, and how another new trend seeks to subvert his influence.

Then, Christians love to forgive those who are involved in scandals, and they love to make a big display of their forgiveness. Their favorite saying is, "He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone." And by this they mean the same thing as when non-Christians say, "Nobody is perfect." Wait, do Christians say this more, or non-Christians? Christians preach what non-Christians say so often and with so much conviction that it is hard to tell whether silly slogans like these should be attributed to one or the other. In any case, forgiving a scandal on this basis makes Christians feel very magnanimous, and they can hardly wait until the next scandal breaks out so they can forgive that one also. This is admittedly a generalization. Many Christians who enjoy scandals are happy enough without the forgiveness part.

Of course, we can say that these are bad Christians. And if so, there is a superabundance of very bad Christians. The Bible's teaching on the subject represents the opposite of these two tendencies. It tells us to hate scandals and to shun gossip. As long as something is mere hearsay, I do not want to hear about it. It is none of my business. I am not interested in it. However, an accusation that is supported by multiple witnesses is another matter. If it is discovered that a church leader is in sin, whether we are referring to heresy, adultery, or some other misconduct, we are not to shrug it off and call that forgiveness. The Bible commands us to publicly expose and rebuke this person, to make an example of him in a way that others may fear the same treatment. We are to demand his repentance, and in many cases, the person should be removed from office.

Verse 19 says, "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses." This does not mean that an accusation brought by two or three witnesses is necessarily true. It is possible that the witnesses are dishonest or incompetent. The point is that unless an accusation is brought by at least two witnesses, "do not entertain" it. This is to protect the accused from unjust and frivolous complaints. No person should have his reputation damaged or his work derailed by a baseless accusation. This safeguard is especially important for church leaders, since their work often makes them the target of people's jealous and malicious attacks. The principle is an application of Deuteronomy 19:15-21. There it is said that "the judges must make a thorough investigation." So a mere accusation is not sufficient to convict a man, but an accusation that seems to have some basis is sufficient to demand an investigation.

The passage also provides a principle on how to deal with a false witness: "If the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." God looks upon perjury or slander with extreme disapproval, especially a false testimony with the potential to harm another person. As it is said in the Ten Commandments, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." The church must not only take plausible accusations seriously, but it must also share God's hatred for false testimony.

The prescription is to "do to him as he intended to do to his brother" and to "purge the evil from among you." In our context, if it is discovered that a church member has offered false testimony against a leader, with the intent to embarrass him, to damage his reputation, undermine his influence, or even remove him from office, then the public rebuke and discipline that would have applied to the leader should now be applied to the false witness. The church should launch an investigation against this witness, and if it is confirmed that he has offered false testimony, the church should denounce him in public, and demand him to repent and to make any appropriate restitution to set things right, including a public apology to the accused and a public statement of clarification to the congregation. If it is ascertained that he has deliberately offered false testimony, he should be removed from any church office that he holds, and stripped of all authority and influence in the church. Unless full repentance and restitution are offered, he is an evil that must be purged from the Christian community – he should be excommunicated.

Now, any church leader who is evil enough to warrant dismissal, and any church member who is evil enough to slander an innocent leader, is probably also evil enough to sue the church for enforcing the biblical instruction to publicly expose the offender. Many church members value their dignity far more than the commandments of God and the welfare of the church. This is because there are too many false believers in our congregations. Indeed, lawsuits arising from church discipline are not unheard of. Therefore, it would be wise for a church to consult with an attorney as to how it can remain protected as it implements biblical policies. Many of these policies should be stated in the church bylaws that officers and members are required to sign before they are accepted into their positions.

24. Inspired Apostle vs. Academic Whores

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. (1 Timothy 6:3-5)

Paul talks about the false teachers again and again. As usual, he condemns them in strong and descriptive terms, offering no flattery and showing no sympathy. He condemns not only the doctrines, but the persons. He condemns not only the actions, but the motives. He does not invite the false teachers to engage in dialogue with him to produce mutual respect and understanding. Christ's government does not negotiate with theological terrorists.

Contemporary believers take the opposite approach. They avoid outright and graphic condemnations. When they must express disagreement, they introduce their statements with flattery, citing the false teachers' credentials and contributions to the church's mission or to the academic world. Although they must disagree, they stress that they sympathize with the false teachers' perspective. They try to focus on the false doctrines, and not the persons who promote them. Certainly, they will not take it upon themselves to condemn their motives. Contrary to the examples of the Lord Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles, who often speak to people's motives, which by definition would make this a Christian thing to do, they rather think that this is an unchristian thing to do. The only people they would condemn as harshly as Paul does are those who condemn false teachers as harshly as Paul does. With the rest, they prefer mutual flattery and compromise.

These modern believers operate by an ethical standard that comes from the world, from the non-Christians, and not from Scripture. They have become proper and professional according to the world's standard. For a little respect, for a little academic credibility, they have sold out to the unbelievers, and have become their whores. Then they have the gall to turn around and condemn those who follow Paul's example as unloving lunatics who use "name-calling" and "ad hominem" arguments. Guess who taught them to say that!

Admittedly, there is no need to unleash a barrage of invectives every time we detect a tiny disagreement. Some doctrinal differences can be discussed cordially, and corrected over a period of time. The errors that Paul has in mind, whether by direct contradiction or by implication, would undermine some central principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That said, the fact is that many doctrinal errors and differences do precisely this. They are

more than tiny disagreements, and they do challenge the supremacy of Christ or his status as the sole mediator between God and men. If, as a matter of principle, a Christian refuses to condemn false teachers in the most harsh and vivid language, offering them no flattery, sympathy, or compromise, and to condemn their persons and motives, but even criticizes those who do, then, to say the least, he falls short of the biblical model. He is unfaithful to the Lord Jesus.

25. The Secret of Contentment

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Timothy 6:6-10)

False teachers think that "godliness is a means to financial gain." Perhaps not all false teachers think this way, but there are some who do. Although Paul may have specific individuals in mind, the statement lends itself to broader applications. Some false teachers operate within Christian congregations. Then, there are others who address a wider audience, but who attempt to infiltrate congregations with their ideas. They teach various philosophies, speculations, and approaches to life that divert people from the plain gospel of Jesus Christ. They appeal to the lusts, hopes, and the desperation of men, inspiring them for all the wrong reasons, and motivating them with false and deceptive foundations. Those who are not grounded in a sound understanding of biblical doctrines are taken captive in their thinking by fanciful fables and theories, and once the false teachers have captured their minds, they have captured their wallets as well.

Spirituality is a huge industry. There is only one truth, but many alternatives to it, and this industry embraces them all. For the more intellectual type, or for those who would like to think of themselves this way, there are heresies that are complex and technical. For the mystical type, there are New Age and occult teachings. For those who wish to better themselves apart from repentance, faith, and the power of God through Jesus Christ, there are thousands of inspirational gurus to choose from. They are bound to make even the lowest loser feel like a winner. For the health-conscious, and for those who wish to attain peace without truth, and tranquility without redemption, there are various kinds of meditation, yoga, and hypnosis. For the scientific-minded, or even for those who enjoy pseudo-science, as if there is a difference, there are materials produced by psychologists, physicists, and other researchers. People will pay for what they want. They will pay for explanations, for stories, for solutions. And there will always be teachers to give them what they want for a price.

Paul writes, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." We must correct two misinterpretations. First, it does not say that *money* itself is a root of all kinds of evil, but that *the love of money* is a root of all kinds of evil. This means that both the rich and the poor can be guilty of this. No one should judge himself safe from this pitfall by the amount of wealth he possesses. In fact, there is no necessary relationship between the two. If you love money – either to gain more, or to keep what you have – Paul is talking

about you. Second, it does not say that the love of money is *the root of every instance* of evil, but that it is *one root of all kinds* of evil. In other words, the love of money has produced evil of all kinds, but it is not the cause or motive for every instance of evil, and the statement leaves room for other causes and motives for evil.

A person who loves money is weak and vulnerable. The world has something he wants, and he is more likely to compromise truth and conscience to get it. He is susceptible to temptation, since there is something in his soul that the devil can appeal to in order to manipulate him. The love of money can lead to total disaster: "Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." A person who loves money is foolish. As Jesus said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" And most likely, he will not gain the whole world, not even a little of it, and still lose his soul.

Contentment grants a person immunity to temptation. Paul writes, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction." A person who is content, by definition, cannot be ensnared by these "foolish and harmful desires." But the power of contentment is much broader, for the reason that temptation appeals to some need or desire, and thus dissatisfaction within the person. Did not Eve fall from righteousness for this reason? Satan did not offer her money, but he stirred up discontent in her, and then he seized upon it and suggested a solution that plunged her into "ruin and destruction." Never underestimate the power of contentment, or the danger of its opposite.

The word for "contentment" comes from a Stoic term that refers to self-sufficiency. If I am self-sufficient, I cannot be bribed and bullied. You have nothing that I want. There is no desire in me that you can use to entice or to control me. I am untouchable. Thus contentment is not a weakness, but an inward strength that enables a person to possess himself and to exercise self-control. It is an inward quality that grants a person independence, and liberates him from the pressure of external circumstances.

Nevertheless, regardless of what Stoic philosophy means by the term, it takes on a Christian meaning in Paul's usage. Elsewhere he calls contentment a "secret" to the Christian life. He writes, "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:11-12). There is the element of self-sufficiency, of independence from circumstances. It does not mean that he never has anything, since he says, "I know what it is to have plenty." But it means that contentment is unaffected by circumstances. He is content when he has plenty. He is content when he is in need.

Then, Paul tells us the reason, or the basis, for his contentment: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*" (v. 12-13). This adds another dimension to our understanding of contentment.

We learn that this "secret" is not some hidden password or incantation, or some technique that, if faithfully practiced, would lift a person to some mystical heights, above all his cares and problems. Rather, this secret of power for service and immunity to temptation stems from the essence of the gospel – confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ. This means that all Christians have the potential to attain it. The resources of Christ is open to everyone who believes. And it also means that it eludes all non-Christians. Although it is declared in the open, it is closed to unbelievers. The Bible says that they are without God and without hope. Non-Christian contentment is a counterfeit, a make-believe, and a warping of the human personality. True contentment is found only in Christ, and as long as non-Christians reject the gospel, it will remain out of their reach. It is something that they are unable to attain even if the "secret" is plainly explained to them.

Moreover, we learn that the self-sufficiency associated with contentment is relative. It is not an absolute and supreme self-sufficiency. Only God is self-sufficient in this sense. But it is an independence from circumstances, and from other creatures and objects. Certainly, it does not refer to an independence from God. In fact, it means the opposite – the basis of Christian contentment, the quality that makes a person unaffected by circumstances, is a complete dependence on God, and in the resources that he has made available to us through Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the most important lesson on contentment. That is, contentment is not mainly negative, but there is a strong positive focus. It is not achieved by a mere denial of desires, which leaves one empty. Rather, it entails a deliberate focus on the immeasurable treasures that we already possess in Christ. It is not produced by an exercise of willpower, but it is a natural outcome of knowledge. And instead of indifference, it is characterized by an obsession with true riches. Contentment, therefore, is not a satisfaction with defeat and lack, but an affirmation of our victory and abundance in Jesus Christ.

26. Fight the Good Fight

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time – God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen. (1 Timothy 6:11-16)

The Christian life is a fight. Now, a Christian may struggle with doubts, fears, lusts, doctrinal perplexities, and such things, and broadly speaking, this is part of the fight that each believer engages in. It has to do with one's personal growth in knowledge and sanctification. But our passage is talking about the fight of "the faith," as in the Christian religion as a system of thought and a way of life, and its progress and prominence in the world. It refers to the objective and public aspect of the fight.

The letter itself tells us what this fight entails. Paul tells Timothy to "command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer." He instructs believers to make prayers and intercessions for all kinds of people, including those in authority, so that we may live peaceful and quiet lives. He sets forth principles for the selection of elders and deacons. He warns against the doctrines of demons. He urges Timothy to give himself wholly to his life and doctrine. His progress is to have a public effect. Paul gives instructions on charity, and here the fight is against the neglect of widows by relatives, and against ungodly widows claiming the church's support. Elders who perform their work well are to be paid well, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching, but the elders who sin are to be publicly rebuked.

The fight, therefore, is fought on behalf of "the faith" – for promoting sound doctrine, for establishing church order, for maintaining an excellent reputation for the gospel of Jesus Christ, and for counteracting the evil influences of this world. There is much opposition against the Christian faith. There is only one way to God and to salvation, but the world invents many alternatives to lure people away from the truth. Non-Christians, or wicked men, argue against us. They mistreat us and persecute us. They attempt to undermine our every effort at telling the truth and doing good works. They will do whatever they can to make us compromise or even recant our faith. Fighting for the faith means that, even in the face of all this, we will make "the good confession" and stand by it.

Our supreme model is the Lord Jesus Christ, who made "the good confession" as he testified before Pontius Pilate. Jesus said that he was a king, that he came into this world to bear witness to the truth, and that everyone on the side of truth would listen to him (John 18:37). As his disciples, we maintain this same confession before the church and the world: Jesus Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He came into the world and bore witness to the truth, and everyone on the side of truth listens to what he said. At the preaching of his word, anyone who is on the side of truth will agree and submit, and anyone who does not agree and submit is not on the side of truth. Any person who resists the king's decree is a rebel and a traitor. The penalty is execution. And under the rule of Christ, this means hellfire and brimstone.