



1 Timothy



REFORMED

EXPOSITORY

COMMENTARY

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

1 Timothy

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

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1 Timothy

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Page design by Lakeside Design Plus

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryken, Philip Graham, 1966–

1 Timothy / Philip Graham Ryken.

p. cm. — (Reformed expository commentary)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-59638-049-3 (cloth)

1. Bible. N.T. Timothy, 1st—Commentaries. I. Title. II. Title: First Timothy.

BS2745.53.R95 2007

227'.83077—dc22

2007015846

To Dick Lucas,

*who is worthy of double honor
for his labor in preaching and teaching,*

and

*to the King of ages—
immortal, invisible, the only God,*

who is worthy of honor and glory forever and ever, amen.

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are

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unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proven to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are

devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely upon for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

The Bible expositions that formed the basis for this book were first preached during Sunday evening services in the early years of my pastoral ministry at Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church. Preaching through 1 Timothy was as much for my own benefit as it was for anyone else's. Like Timothy, I was just beginning to learn how to pastor a church by reading and preaching the Scriptures, defending sound doctrine, developing godly leadership, and caring spiritually for every member of God's household. To study this epistle was like sitting shoulder to shoulder with Timothy during his pastoral internship with the best of teachers: the apostle Paul.

I am grateful to God for the opportunity to return to 1 Timothy and contribute this volume to the Reformed Expository Commentary. The original manuscript was greatly improved by suggestions from Rick Phillips, Iain Duguid, and Dan Doriani, who worked especially hard to make sure that my exegesis was informed by the best and latest scholarship. The following people also deserve special thanks: the session and congregation of Tenth Church, for their prayers, encouragement, and the gift of sabbatical time to complete a final revision of the manuscript; the staff at P&R Publishing, for their labors in bringing the book to press; and Lisa and the children, for their constant faith and abiding love. Together we are all members of the household of God, and confessors of "the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16).

One special debt of gratitude remains. During the last year of my doctoral studies at Oxford University I traveled into London every Monday to listen to Dick Lucas lecture on preaching at the Cornhill Training Institute. For decades Reverend Lucas has had an influential preaching ministry at St. Helen's Bishopsgate, in the heart of London's financial district, and also more widely among evangelicals in England and America. By the

Preface

grace of God, his ministry has been a model of excellence in Scripture exposition, and studying with him each week was an important part of my final preparation for gospel ministry. Reverend Lucas is also well known for his generous encouragement of younger ministers—a living example of what Paul said to Timothy: “Treat younger men like brothers” (1 Tim. 5:1). His willingness some years ago to read and comment on my exposition of 1 Timothy is typical of his kindness and commitment to expository preaching. To me and many others, he has been a true father in the faith.

≈ *1 Timothy*

DEFEND THE FAITH

1

A TRUE SON IN THE FAITH

1 Timothy 1:1–11

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1 Tim. 1:1–2)



When I left for college my father gave me a copy of Louis Berkhof's *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, a small classic in the tradition of Reformation theology. The book was inscribed with these words: "For Philip upon entering college, in the hope that your theology will remain Reformed." My father wanted me to remain true to the biblical and evangelical doctrines defended during the Protestant Reformation, doctrines like the authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone. In other words, he wanted me to remain a true son in the faith.

A TRUE SON

Paul had the same desire for Timothy. He considered himself to be the young minister's spiritual father, so he addressed his first Pastoral Epistle

“To Timothy, my true child in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2). At the time he wrote this, Paul was coming to the close of his world-changing ministry. He was the great missionary of the New Testament, God’s evangelist to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). He was also an apostle, a messenger or ambassador for God. And as an eyewitness of the risen Christ (Acts 9:3–6), he was a man appointed to teach God’s people with divine authority.

Paul was not a self-appointed apostle, or even an apostle commissioned by the church. On the contrary, he had been chosen, called, and commissioned directly by Jesus Christ. His apostleship thus came “by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1). Not only is this a strong claim for Paul’s authority, but it is also a strong claim for the deity of Jesus Christ. A command from the Father is also said to be a command from the Son, and vice versa. Therefore, the Son must be equal in power and authority to the Father. Jesus is God.

Already it is evident that this letter is full of profound teaching about the attributes and activities of God. “God our Savior”—this phrase looks back to the salvation God accomplished through Christ; “Christ Jesus our hope”—this looks forward to the day when Christ will return in power and glory. So, as John Stott explains, “Paul locates his apostleship in a historical context, whose beginning was the saving activity of *God our Savior* in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, and whose culmination will be *Christ Jesus our hope*, his personal and glorious coming, which is the object of our Christian hope, and which will bring down the curtain on the historical process.”¹ Not bad for a return address! Paul’s opening lines mention virtually everything God has done and will do to save his people.

Like his return address, Paul’s greeting is full of profound theology. He offers Timothy “grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” (1 Tim. 1:2). The apostle starts with the traditional Greek salutation of grace (*charis*), ends with the traditional Jewish greeting of peace (*shalom*), and inserts mercy (*eleos*) to make a distinctively Christian blessing.² From the very beginning, therefore, this epistle is full of Christ. It is full of the hope that Christ will return in glory, the grace Christ offers to sinners,

1. John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 39.

2. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles: Timothy I and II, Titus*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1960), 41.

the mercy Christ gives to the needy, and the peace Christ has made with God through his death on the cross. The letter brings grace, mercy, and peace from Christ to Timothy, Paul's spiritual son.

Timothy was a true son in the faith in several respects. Paul first met the young man when he passed through Lystra on his second missionary journey. Perhaps he introduced Timothy to Christ in the first place. In any case, Paul heard of his excellent reputation and invited him to join his missionary team (Acts 16:1–3). Timothy began his ministry under the apostle's tutelage. He seemed like a son because he was relatively young. This is why Timothy is such an excellent model for young ministers. He was probably in his thirties by the time this letter was written, yet Paul still tells him not to let anyone look down on him because he is young (1 Tim. 4:12; cf. 2 Tim. 2:22).

Paul also considered Timothy a son because of their close personal relationship. They traveled together to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2), to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17), and to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). Timothy stayed at Paul's side when he was imprisoned in Rome (Phil. 2:19). They also collaborated to write six books of the New Testament. The letters of 2 Corinthians, Philipians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon come from Paul *and* Timothy, with Paul of course serving as the primary writer. Timothy also served as Paul's pastoral representative, the church leader delegated to lead the church that Paul had planted in Ephesus.

After all they had been through, it is not surprising Paul considered Timothy his spiritual son. He uses a term of affection: *teknon*, meaning "dear child." He showed the same fatherly feeling when he wrote to the Corinthians and called him "Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:17). Later, when he was in prison, he wrote, "I have no one like him. . . . But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel" (Phil. 2:20, 22).

A TRUE FAITH

Paul's purpose in 1 Timothy is to help his spiritual son remain true. In the opening verses of the letter he exhorts him to hold on to the true faith (1 Tim. 1:2), to defend the true doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3–4), to uphold the true use of the law (1 Tim. 1:6–11), and to cherish a true love (1 Tim. 1:5).

A True Son in the Faith

First, then, Timothy had true faith. The important thing about him was not that he was Paul's child, but that he was God's child. He was a true child *in the faith*. So the relationship between these two men was spiritual as well as personal. Their family ties were bound by their common faith in Christ. Timothy was a true son of Paul because he was a true son of God.

Perhaps Paul called God "Father" at the beginning of his letter to remind Timothy that he was God's dear child. This is every believer's great privilege. As the apostle John exults, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1). Everyone who is born again by God's Spirit is a son or a daughter of God, with a right to all of God's fatherly care and affection. The phrase Paul uses for "true child" (*gnēsio tekṇō*) refers to natural childbirth. Since Timothy's mother was Jewish, but his father was Greek (Acts 16:1), orthodox Jews would have considered his birth illegitimate. Yet Timothy was a genuine Christian, born of the Spirit, and thus he was Paul's legitimate spiritual heir.

Timothy learned this true faith at his mother's knee. In his subsequent letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 Tim. 1:5). Timothy was a true son in the faith, not only to Paul, but also to his own believing mother.

True Christian sons and daughters often learn the faith from their mothers. Augustine wrote how his mother Monica travailed in prayer for his salvation. In the *Confessions* that he made to God, Augustine testified to her faithfulness:

My mother, your faithful servant, was weeping for me to you, weeping more than mothers weep for the bodily deaths of their sons. For she, by that faith and spirit which she had from you, saw the death in which I lay, and you, Lord, heard her prayer. You heard her and you did not despise her tears which fell streaming and watered the ground beneath her eyes in every place where she prayed; indeed you heard her.³

Or consider J. Gresham Machen, the defender of Christian orthodoxy at Princeton and Westminster seminaries during the first decades of the twentieth

3. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1963), 3:11.

century. It was his mother, Mary Gresham Machen, who instructed him in the Bible, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁴

The influence of mothers holds true for ordinary Christians as well as for great heroes of the faith. I think of my own mother, who was convinced that maternity was the better part of her life's work. She did not always find it easy to be at home with her children, but she prayed that God would bless her spiritual investment in their lives. To that end, she often took the prayer of Moses and made it her own: "May the favor of the Lord my God rest upon me; establish the work of my hands for me—yes, establish the work of my hands" (Ps. 90:17 NIV). Mothers who devote their maternity to the Lord are often blessed, in the end, with sons and daughters like Timothy: true children in the faith.

THE TRUE DOCTRINE

If a true son becomes a minister, he must teach true doctrine. This is the first thing Paul says in the body of his letter: "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith" (1 Tim. 1:3–4; cf. 2 Tim. 2:14, 16, 23).

This command helps put the entire epistle in context. Timothy was in Ephesus, a city Paul visited at least twice, once briefly (Acts 18:19–21) and once for more than two years of extended teaching (Acts 19:10). Perhaps 1 Timothy was written shortly after Paul's second visit, although it is more likely the letter was written sometime after Paul was released from his prison in Rome. In any case, Timothy was in Ephesus, the center of Paul's church-planting strategy for Asia Minor.

As it happens, Paul's first letter to Timothy was actually his second letter to the Ephesians. It was not private correspondence. The benediction at the end of chapter 6 is given in the plural (1 Tim. 6:21), indicating that like the rest of Paul's epistles, this letter was for the whole church. This means that 1 Timothy can and should be read on several different levels: as a personal

4. D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994), 13.

communication from an apostle to a minister delegated to lead a local church; as a pastoral letter from a church planter to the congregation he loves, with instructions for their ongoing work; and as a general statement of principles for life, ministry, and worship in the family of faith. Paul offers his purpose statement for the letter in chapter 3: “I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Tim. 3:14–15).

Timothy was to remain in Ephesus in order to “charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3). The word Paul used to describe “different doctrine” is one he may have invented: *heterodidaskalein* (cf. 1 Tim. 6:3). In his letters Paul often condemned those who preached a different Jesus, a different Spirit, or a different gospel (2 Cor. 11:4; cf. Gal. 1:6). Any doctrine which is different from the true doctrine is a false doctrine. There is only one right theology; every other theology is wrong. There is only one orthodoxy; everything else is heterodoxy, although of course the church must give answers to the new questions and challenges that arise in every age. John Calvin put it well: “We therefore teach that faithful ministers are now not permitted to coin any new doctrine, but that they are simply to cleave to that doctrine to which God has subjected men without exception.”⁵

Who were the heterodox teachers of the Ephesian church? Paul did not name any names. Instead, he ominously referred to them as “certain persons.” No doubt Timothy knew exactly whom he was talking about! We might even imagine the sidelong glances that were cast at these men by other leaders in the church.

What were these men teaching? They were obsessed with myths and endless genealogies. “Myths” sounds like the stories or Gnostic philosophies of ancient Greece. Plato, for example, used this term to refer to the legends and fables of antiquity.⁶ However, even though there was some Greek influence on the church (especially since Ephesus was the home of the goddess Diana), “myths and endless genealogies” more probably refers to the teaching of certain Jewish rabbis (cf. Titus 1:14: “Jewish myths”). In this connection, it is noteworthy that the false teachers in Ephesus desired to be “teachers of the law” (1 Tim. 1:7).

5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.8.9.

6. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 330 D.

Two ancient Jewish texts shed further light on Paul's meaning. One is entitled *The Book of Jubilees*, written around 125 BC. Another was written after AD 70 and is called *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo*. These books retell the Old Testament story from a Pharisaic point of view and include extended genealogies. They go beyond the Scriptures to speculate about the biographies of the biblical saints. John Stott describes them as “tendentious rewrites of a section of Old Testament history. Both stress the indestructibility of Israel and of the law. And both embellish their story with fanciful additions.”⁷ The heterodox theologians in Ephesus seem to have been thinking along similar lines. They started with the Bible and made up the rest as they went along. Their teaching was little more than guesswork, the product of a lively imagination. Then, as now, such speculative theories were likely to excite the interest of weak or unsound hearers.

The presence of these false teachers was no surprise to Paul. When he made his tearful farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, he warned them about this eventuality: “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29–30). Notice Paul's concern: that false teachers will draw the people of God away from the gospel truth.

The contemporary church faces the same danger. The myths and endless genealogies of the present day are extrabiblical texts which are treated as Scripture. Many cult writings, like the *Book of Mormon*, fall into this category. So does the *Apocrypha* (if it is regarded as sacred Scripture), for these ancient texts were rejected by the Jews as not belonging to the Word of God. Another example is the so-called *Gospel of Thomas* which the Jesus Seminar and other heretical groups have tried to make famous. The *Gospel of Thomas* was compiled in Egypt sometime between AD 150 and AD 350. It claims to contain 120 “secret words of the living Jesus,” but although a few of its teachings echo the biblical Gospels, the rest are all myths.

Another myth is any attempt to find hidden knowledge in the Bible. A notorious example here is *The Bible Code*, which rearranges the letters of Genesis and claims to decipher them in order to predict world events. According to the author, events such as the Gulf War and the assassination

7. Stott, *Guard the Truth*, 44.

of Yitzhak Rabin were predicted by “the Bible code.”⁸ There are many serious problems with the specific details of *The Bible Code*.⁹ But the whole approach is misguided: it neglects the plain meaning of Scripture in order to speculate on matters of merely contemporary concern. Similarly, Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* purports to provide secret knowledge about Jesus, but this knowledge is based on an unreliable hodgepodge of discredited “gospels” and historical speculations.¹⁰

Many evangelical discussions about the end times also fall into this category. Even if they are not myths or genealogies, they are at least endless! Some people seem to run for their handbooks of Bible prophecy every time something happens in the Middle East, hoping to figure out where we are on the timeline to eternity. Usually, though, they are asking the wrong questions and getting the wrong answers. A good deal of Roman Catholic dogma is also mythical. Central Catholic doctrines such as purgatory, the veneration of saints, and the adoration of Mary come from tradition. They are speculations that go beyond biblical teaching—exactly the kind of “different teaching” the Bible condemns.

True sons and daughters in the faith are commanded not to teach such things for two reasons. The first is that they “promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Tim. 1:4; cf. 6:4 and 2 Tim. 2:14). Not every religious discussion is equally beneficial, as the Ephesians were starting to discover. Some topics lead to debates about ancient religious texts, the end times, heretical dogmas, or other matters not addressed in the Bible.

The other reason not to teach false doctrine is that it is a complete waste of time: “Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion” (1 Tim. 1:6; cf. 2 Tim. 2:16). They have lost their theological bearings. They have drifted away, which is the way most people abandon Christian orthodoxy: one step at a time. The more they deviate, the more tedious and tendentious their doctrine becomes. Elsewhere in the New Testament—in Galatians, for example—Paul attacks false teaching because the gospel is at stake. Here the problem is not so much a gospel issue as a stewardship issue. Heterodoxy is a waste of time.

8. Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

9. See Benjamin Wittes, “Of Bible Codes and Idols,” *First Things* 78 (Dec. 1997): 12–14.

10. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

Today one place to find such meaningless talk is on the Internet, where people often engage in wearisome and unproductive theological dialogues. The same is also true at seminaries and divinity schools where scholars are on a perpetual quest for novelty. But some religious matters are not even worth a good argument. There is a trade-off here between talking and doing. Either we can promote controversy or we can exercise good stewardship in thinking about theology. Salvation in Christ is the most important thing God has ever planned or accomplished for his people. Therefore, it is the most important message for us to study, to teach, and to live. Nothing should distract us from that message, least of all some idle speculation which goes beyond Scripture. Why waste time when there is God's work to be done?

This is a warning not to major on minors. Those who want to be dogmatic must be sure they have the right dogma. Paul says the false teachers in Ephesus do not lack conviction. Their teaching is full of what he calls "confident assertions"; however, they speak "without understanding what they are saying" (1 Tim. 1:7). There is a dangerous combination here: arrogance and ignorance. Error can be taught with as much conviction as the truth. In fact, the more argumentative someone is about a theological issue, the more likely he or she is to be spiritually unbalanced. Philip Towner applies the obvious spiritual lesson: "These characteristics make a timeless portrait of the false teacher. Doctrinal subtleties, special interpretation, spurious claims to authority, controversy and dogmatism ought to make God's people suspicious. At the same time, evidence of these same tendencies in our own lives ought to cause alarms to go off."¹¹

THE TRUE USE OF THE LAW

The reason the false teachers in Ephesus were unbalanced had something to do with God's law. Their desire to be "teachers of the law" (1 Tim. 1:7) suggests that they claimed the right to interpret the law of Moses from the Old Testament. The false teachers wanted to be law-teachers, which brought to Paul's mind a third thing every true child in the faith must have: a true understanding of the law.

11. Philip H. Towner, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 49.

Paul was opposed to the self-appointed teachers of the law in Ephesus, but not to the law itself. So he quickly went on to say, “Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully” (1 Tim. 1:8; cf. Rom. 7:12). There is an obvious wordplay here, which the New English Bible renders as follows: “We all know that the law is an excellent thing, provided we treat it as law.”

What is the proper way to use the law? Reformation Christians have taught that there are three proper uses of biblical law. One is the spiritual use of the law to reveal sin. As Martin Luther wrote in his *Lectures on Galatians*, the law shows sinners their sin “so that by the recognition of sin they may be humbled, frightened, and worn down, and so may long for grace.”¹² A second use of the law is its civil use to restrain wrongdoers. This is how the law is useful for society; it keeps criminals in their place. John Calvin added “a third and principal use” of the law, namely, to teach us God’s will for our lives. This is how Christians use the law. As we meditate on the law, we are “aroused to obedience. . . and drawn back from the slippery path of transgression.”¹³ These three uses of the law might be termed the pedagogical use, the political use, and the pious use of the law.

Which use of the law does Paul have in mind when he writes, “the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners” (1 Tim. 1:9)? Obviously, he is not describing the third use of the law in which the Christian obeys the law of Christ. Rather, he is referring to a use of the law which is not for law-abiding citizens who already know how to behave themselves. Thus he mainly has in view the second use of the law: its power in society to restrain those who are a law unto themselves. The law of the land is not for saints, but for sinners. Here some commentators point out that none of us is righteous; we are all commandment-breakers. This is true, of course, but it is not the point of this passage. Although Paul does not deny that the law has other uses, here he is mainly concerned about its civil use.

The second use of the law is implied by the apostle’s list of vices: “the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice

12. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 26:327.

13. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.12.

homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:9–10). Here Paul mentions the most extreme forms of defiance and insubordination. He condemns not shoplifting but kidnapping, not lust but perverse sexual acts, not white lies but perjury, and so forth. In fact, he chooses the kinds of gross sin that civil laws often prohibit. According to Roman law, most of these vices were punishable by death. The law has a serious purpose of restraining wicked behavior: “*This*, Paul says, is why God gave his Law, not for idle speculation and meaningless talk.”¹⁴

The list in 1 Timothy also seems to echo many of the Ten Commandments.¹⁵ One way to see this is to begin with “those who strike their fathers or mothers” and work backwards. Such domestic violence violates the fifth commandment to honor one’s father and mother. The word “profane” aptly describes those who break the fourth commandment by profaning the Lord’s Day. “Unholy” is just the term to use for those who fail to sanctify the Lord’s name, and thereby break the third commandment. Perhaps this leaves the “ungodly” and “sinners” to break the first and second commandments, but whether Paul has in mind the first two commandments or not, he clearly refers to commandments six through nine. “Murderers” break the sixth commandment, while “the sexually immoral” and “men who practice homosexuality” break the seventh. Next come “enslavers.” The New Testament is sometimes criticized for promoting slavery, but here Paul condemns slave traffic as the worst violation of the eighth commandment. Finally, he condemns “liars” and “perjurers,” who break the ninth commandment by bearing false witness. Perhaps the tenth commandment—which prohibits coveting—is omitted because it governs a sinful attitude not punishable by civil law.

After this rehearsal of God’s commandments, Paul’s concluding comment about the law comes as something of a surprise: the law is for “whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted” (1 Tim. 1:10–11). The heinous sins just mentioned are the result of unsound doctrine. Not only are they against the law, but they also fail to conform to “the gospel which tells of the glory of God”

14. Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 46.

15. See George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 83–85.

(NEB). The gospel thus requires the same conduct that the law requires—not as a way to merit grace, but as the appropriate response of gratitude.

It is sometimes argued that the gospel makes the law obsolete. It is true that the gospel does away with the law as a basis for justification. Thus the difference between law and gospel is that the law is powerless to save. As Paul says elsewhere, “by works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Only the gospel—in which the righteousness of Christ is offered to us by faith—is able to justify. Yet the gospel does not lower God’s legal standards. The law remains useful for driving sinners to Christ (pedagogical use), restraining sin (political use), and teaching believers how to live for Christ (pious use). Therefore, as George Knight explains, “when the law is rightly applied as an ethical restraint against sin, it is in full accordance with the ethical norm given in the gospel as the standard for the redeemed life.”¹⁶

Not only does lawlessness fail to conform to the gospel, but it is also contrary to sound doctrine. The word for “sound” (*hygiainousē*) is a medical term meaning “healthy” or “wholesome.” Life cannot be separated from doctrine. Unhealthy theology produces unhealthy conduct, and an unsound life always betrays unsound doctrine. Every sin comes ultimately from a failure to believe rightly about God.

It is significant that the Greek text of 1 Timothy describes correct teaching as “the sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10). Not *a* sound doctrine, but *the* sound doctrine. This idea is repeated throughout the Pastoral Epistles: *the* faith, *the* truth, *the* teaching, and so forth. The Bible insists that there is one standard for Christian theology. This standard is the teaching of Christ and his apostles found in the pages of the New Testament, in full agreement with the prophetic witness of the Old Testament.

Paul’s emphasis on the sound doctrine is a valuable corrective for these pluralistic times, in which people say, “Your theology is just your opinion. Christianity may be true for you, but not for me.” A notable example of this way of thinking comes from *Man Friday*, a 1975 film based on *Robinson Crusoe*. The original novel by Daniel DeFoe was a deeply Christian work, but in the film Crusoe’s friend Friday is a champion for religious pluralism. “Worship any way you like,” he says, “as long as you mean it. God won’t mind.”¹⁷

16. Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 91.

17. Philip Zaleski, “The Strange Shipwreck of Robinson Crusoe,” *First Things* 53 (May 1995): 41.

The truth is, however, that God *does* mind. There is only one true theology; every other doctrine is false. Here is how John Stott applies Paul's emphasis on the truth of sound doctrine to the contemporary Christian:

The pertinence of this theme, at the end of the twentieth century, is evident. For contemporary culture is being overtaken and submerged by the spirit of postmodernism. . . . The postmodern mind . . . declares that there is no such thing as objective or universal truth; that all so-called "truth" is purely subjective, being culturally conditioned; and that therefore we all have our own truth, which has as much right to respect as anybody else's. Pluralism is an offspring of postmodernism; it affirms the independent validity of every faith and ideology, and demands in shrill tones that we abandon as impossibly arrogant any attempt to convert somebody (let alone everybody) to our opinion. In contrast to this relativization of truth, it is wonderfully refreshing to read Paul's unambiguous commitment to it.¹⁸

When John Calvin dedicated his commentary to the Duke of Somerset, he called 1 Timothy "highly relevant to our own times."¹⁹ It is all the more relevant five centuries later. Now, as then, God wants his true sons and daughters in the faith to know and defend orthodoxy because it is *the* true doctrine.

TRUE LOVE

What connotations are brought to mind by the word "doctrine"? To many people the term sounds rigid, inflexible, impractical, probably boring. The last person most people want to meet is someone who will straighten out their theology. However, this is exactly what Paul tells Timothy to do: "charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:3). A charge is a military order. The Bible thus gives ministers the authority to oppose false doctrine. Yet notice that the purpose or goal of defending true doctrine is to create true love: "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). A true son in the faith must have true love, which, according to the Scriptures, flows naturally from a love for doctrine.

18. Stott, *Guard the Truth*, 10.

19. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to Timothy and Titus* (1548–50; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), 182.

False doctrine does just the opposite. The problem with heterodoxy is not just that it is unorthodox, but also that it leads to controversy. It disturbs the life and love of the church. In his book *The Cruelty of Heresy*, C. F. Allison argues that heresy is the ultimate cruelty.²⁰ This is because it does not love people enough to warn them about the judgment to come or to insist that Jesus is the only way to salvation. In the end, every false theology is murderous to the soul. Teaching heterodoxy is perhaps the most unloving thing a person can do. Is any sin greater than the murder of a soul?

Only true doctrine teaches people how to love God and others. True doctrine fosters the love that comes from “a pure heart” (1 Tim. 1:5). The heart is the center of the inner spiritual life. A pure or cleansed heart is a loving heart because it has no self-interest. It is untainted by mixed motives. Its only aspiration is to put others first. True love also comes from “a good conscience” (1 Tim. 1:5). The conscience is the center of the moral life. A guilty conscience leads to the hatred of one’s neighbor. It creates distance or even animosity in a relationship. But a conscience made good by God’s grace has nothing to hide. It brings people close to one another in intimate relationship. Then true love comes from “a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5)—literally, an “unhypocritical faith.” A hypocrite cannot love anyone as much as he loves himself. He is mainly concerned what others think of him, whereas true love is selfless.

This kind of love—true love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith—is the best advertisement for true doctrine. Love is also the best test of our theology, for true love and true doctrine go together. Liberal theology wants love without doctrine. It is willing to tolerate all kinds of doctrinal error, as long as people don’t fight about it. On the other hand, some Reformation churches are willing to go without the love as long as they maintain sound doctrine. But that is neither true love nor true doctrine! Wherever doctrine is the purest, love must be the highest.

Do you practice the doctrine of love as much as you love your doctrine? The better you understand God’s grace in Christ, the more your life will overflow with zeal for the lost, love for the church, and compassion for the needy. If we are not great lovers, there is something wrong with our love, or our doctrine, or both.

20. C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (London: SPCK, 1994).

The Bible does not indicate if Timothy remained a true son in the faith. Presumably he did. But sadly the Bible does indicate that eventually his congregation wandered from the Lord. The New Testament contains yet another letter to the Ephesians. The short letter to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2 warmly commends the congregation for defending true doctrine: “you have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false” (Rev. 2:2). Yet somewhere along the way the Ephesians lost their true love: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev. 2:4). These people loved their doctrine, but they were forgetting the doctrine of love.

This is a reminder that the true children of God must have true love as well as true faith and true doctrine. Who is sufficient for these things? Who is able to defend the truth of God’s Word while at the same time living out the love of the gospel? We can only do this through the saving work of Jesus Christ and the transforming work of his Spirit. In our own strength we might be able to defend the truth without living in love, or to live in love without defending truth, but we could not have both together. Without the love of God we inevitably become harsh, judgmental, and legalistic in our defense of the truth; without the truth of God our love becomes an excuse for theological compromise. Sadly, this is what we usually see in the church: truth without love, or love without truth, rarely both together. But when we do find love and truth together, we know that this can only be a gracious work of the one true God,²¹ who will use the union of love and truth to save dying sinners.

21. Francis Schaeffer makes a similar point about love and purity in *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 98.