

1 TIMOTHY 6:20, 21

A POSTSCRIPT FOR PREACHERS

“O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.

“Grace be with you.”¹

It is no secret that I am a news junkie; I fill my spare time with news reports, even watching news reports while eating my lunch. Unquestionably, my favourite news programmes are on Fox News Channel. My addiction leads me to set aside time for an afternoon coffee while watching Bret Baier’s Special Report. When turning on the television during a break in the afternoon to permit watching Special Report on Fox News, I frequently catch the final few moments of “The Five,” the show that precedes Special Report. That show almost always closes with a segment called “One More Thing.”

The “One More Thing” segment consists of brief items that have drawn the interest of the panel members. The items may be something of personal interest, a humorous news item or some serious point that needs to be stressed. As I read the text for this particular message, my mind was drawn to that segment of “The Five.” The Apostle is saying to the young pastor, “O, yes, one more thing.” This one more thing is a summary of all that Paul has written to Timothy.

It would be easy to dismiss these final statements; but dismissal would be a mistake. Christians will benefit from refreshing their memories by focusing, even for a brief while, on Paul’s final reminder. We will benefit because God has seen fit to include this warning in the Word. Obviously, He considered the danger to be real and the warning vital. We will benefit from focusing on what the Apostle has written because the churches of our Lord still face the particular danger that was concerning to the Apostle and similar dangers. Moreover, we will benefit because thorough study of what the Spirit has included will equip us to think logically and critically. With that, let’s get into the text to see what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

ONE MORE THING — “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you.” The urgency driving Paul as he writes is conveyed by the construction of the sentence. The Apostle uses the vocative, “O Timothy,” addressing Timothy directly, pointedly demanding his full attention. What Paul is about to say serves as a summation of the entire letter in a single sentence. It is as though the Apostle has added this postscript to say, “Timothy, this is really, really important.” It is Paul’s way of saying, “Oh, yeah, one more thing!” This final charge expresses in succinct form the purpose and the theme of the letter; for one last time it expresses the Apostle’s concern.

Having grabbed the elder’s attention, Paul rushes to ensure that Timothy understands that the elder is always responsible to be on guard. Modern church-goers are often uncomfortable if the elder appears aggressive in pursuit of righteousness. Admittedly, there is no warrant for meanness; nor may an elder be pugnacious or combative either physically or verbally. However, the elder is to be a warrior. He is charged with the responsibility of guarding God’s flock and of keeping the commandments of God. He is defender of the Faith, resisting the insinuation of error and snatching the unwary from dangers that always lurk nearby.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Speaking of guarding the deposit, Paul employed a word [*phylássō*] that speaks of guarding closely, of watching or of obeying²; it carries the connotation of defending a person or a position.³ Thus, the word is quite descriptive, speaking of the responsibility imposed on Timothy as the elder of the congregation. As God's undershepherd, he is a defender of the flock.

Earlier, Paul used this word in a charge given Timothy. "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to *keep* these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality" [1 TIMOTHY 5:21]. In his next letter to Timothy, the Apostle would use this same word to caution against an opponent to the Faith. "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. *Beware* of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message" [2 TIMOTHY 4:14, 15]. We begin to have an idea of Paul's concern.

Let's look at some other instances where this particular word has been used in Scripture. In His High Priestly prayer, the Master confessed to the Father, "While I was with [the disciples], I kept them in your name, which you have given me. *I have guarded* them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled" [JOHN 17:12].

When Paul had presented his case before Felix, the Roman governor deferred making a judgement. "He said, 'I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.' And he commanded him *to be guarded* in Herod's praetorium" [ACTS 23:35].

Writing of Paul's arrival in Rome, Doctor Luke states, "When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who *guarded* him" [ACTS 28:16].

Here are some of the other instances where Paul used this Greek term, *phylássō*. "The Lord is faithful. He will establish you and *guard* you against the evil one" [2 THESSALONIANS 3:3].

In his next letter to Timothy, Paul will write, "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able *to guard* until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, *guard* the good deposit entrusted to you" [2 TIMOTHY 1:12-14].

When Paul uses the word "guard" in our text, I note that it is an aorist imperative, indicating urgency. In short, Timothy's ministry—and the ministry of each elder since that time—may be summed up by the concept that a primary responsibility is to guard that which is entrusted to him. What is to be guarded is "the deposit entrusted to [Timothy]." In order to discover what this deposit might be, I direct attention to Paul's final letter to Timothy.

The deposit is mentioned again in 2 TIMOTHY 1:12, 14, which I just read moments ago. Let's look again at that portion of the Word. "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you" [2 TIMOTHY 1:12-14]. These three instances account for the usage of this noun in the New Testament. Something was entrusted to Paul, something that God Himself will guard. Then, Paul speaks of "the good deposit" that was entrusted to Timothy and which is to be guarded by the Holy Spirit.

² James Swanson, **Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)**, (Logos Research Systems, Inc., Oak Harbor, WA 1997)

³ William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: a Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur** (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL 1979)

In either case cited, the Apostle speaks of a definite deposit; he speaks of “my deposit”; or in addressing Timothy, Paul speaks of “the good deposit.” Timothy is a steward or guardian of this deposit, just as Paul is a steward or guardian of that same deposit. Obviously, the deposit is not restricted to one individual; God has entrusted to all elders a deposit of some sort. In the opening paragraphs of this First Letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of “the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which *I have been entrusted*” [1 TIMOTHY 1:11]. Moreover, as we saw just a moment ago, Paul admonished Timothy, “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit *entrusted to you*” [2 TIMOTHY 1:14]. Finally, Paul instructed Timothy “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses *entrust* to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” [2 TIMOTHY 2:2].

Taken together, this leads to the conclusion that “the good deposit” is the Gospel and all its accompanying truth revealed in Scripture. The one thing entrusted to each elder is the Gospel of Christ. J. N. D. Kelly writes, “The noun translated **trust** ... is a legal term connoting something which is placed on trust in another man’s keeping. The suggestion is that the Christian message (‘the faith’ or ‘the truth’, as it is so often called in these letters) is not something which the church’s minister works out for himself or is entitled to add to; it is a divine revelation which has been committed to his care, and which it is his bounden duty to pass on unimpaired to others.”⁴

Here, the Apostle used the language of commerce. In the ancient world there were no safe deposit boxes. Whenever a man went on a long journey, he might leave his valued possessions with someone whom he trusted. When the valuables were deposited, it was up to the one receiving the deposit to keep them safe. According to ancient legal doctrine, a trustee was obligated to preserve a deposit “unharmful and unchanged.”⁵

Paul identifies portions of that sacred trust that is deposited at multiple points in this First Letter to Timothy. For instance, Paul declared that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” [1 TIMOTHY 1:15]. There are not two means of salvation; indeed, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” [ACTS 4:12].

Paul also testified, “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” [1 TIMOTHY 2:5,6]. We approach the Father neither through saints nor through priests; we come to God through Jesus His Son.

Also, the Apostle stated the great mystery of godliness, that God “was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” [1 TIMOTHY 3:16].

Paul was trusting Timothy to guard these doctrines; Timothy was a trustee of the Gospel. Similarly, each elder is a trustee of the Gospel. Every Gospel minister has received as a sacred trust the message of salvation in Christ the Lord—the incarnation, the atonement, the redemption and the resurrection of Christ Jesus. The elder is not free to make up his theology as he goes along; he must proclaim the message he himself has received. The man of God is not to innovate, but to preserve. Orthodox Christianity is not to be reinvented, re-envisioned or reinterpreted; it is to be cherished, guarded and defended. If the Gospel is neglected or mishandled, will not He who gave the deposit hold accountable those to whom it is entrusted?

⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, **The Pastoral Epistles, Black’s New Testament Commentary** (Continuum, London 1963) 150

⁵ Jouette Bassler, **1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus** (Abingdon, Nashville, TN) 121, cited by Philip Graham Ryken, **1 Timothy: Reformed Expository Commentary**, Richard D. Phillips, Daniel M. Doriani and Philip Graham Ryken (eds.), (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ 2007) 287

James warns members of the earliest churches, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” [JAMES 3:1]. I do not intend to provide exposition of what James has said at this time; I am, however, compelled to point out the cautionary warning James issued: “You know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Remember, James is addressing Christians; he is not warning unbelievers who enter into the ministry—James is warning professed believers. We who teach must anticipate stricter judgement—we are held to a higher standard. Those entering the service of Christ and those placing themselves under a given ministry must not do so lightly. The consequences of error are simply too great to be neglected or treated casually!

Paul confronted the false teachers in the opening words of this first Letter to Timothy. “Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” [1 TIMOTHY 1:6, 7]. Some of these false teachers were quite likely believers. However, if this is the case, they were believers who held exalted opinions of themselves and of their abilities. Thus, they presumed to promote themselves as spokesmen for God, seeking glory for themselves. The result of such arrogant self-promotion was that they were leading the congregation into error. Regardless of how noble one’s intentions may be, failure to guard the deposit with which he was entrusted must lead to disaster for the assembly.

It is a sorrowful observation that many who enter into the service of Christ the Lord do so with inferior motives. Some enter through the urging of parents or friends, seeking to please those whom they love. Others see the service of God’s people as an easy means of earning a livelihood. I have known far too many of this sort of charlatan. The tragedy is that they could not recognise their perfidy. This is the common condition resulting when churches substitute credentials for character, and when they substitute connections for calling. Other ministers have a genuine desire to be helpful to needy people. These deluded souls are motivated more by altruistic motives or they have a predisposition to relieve deprivation; nevertheless, they have no divine appointment. Still others seek only to promote themselves and prove a point.

The tragedy of those who occupy the sacred desk without divine appointment is that in time these self-deluded individuals will, of necessity, disseminate error. This sin against the faithful and against the Lord Christ Himself is inevitable because they have no message based on the eternal Word and because they lack the passion to pursue God’s glory above all. They can only draw attention to themselves rather than seeking to magnify the Name of Christ the Lord.

On multiple occasions the Apostle appealed to his motivation for service before the Lord. Writing in the first missive to the Corinthian saints, the Apostle wrote, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:1]. Eugene Peterson has captured the power of what Paul wrote in this particular instance. “Don’t imagine us leaders to be something we aren’t. We are servants of Christ, not his masters. We are guides into God’s most sublime secrets, not security guards posted to protect them. The requirements for a good guide are reliability and accurate knowledge”⁶ [1 CORINTHIANS 4:1, 2].

Isn’t that great! “Requirements for a good guide are reliability and accurate knowledge.” Some years ago, I was informed that a woman sought to slander me by saying that I was about a hundred years out of date. I told the one relating this to me that I was deeply insulted! It was my belief that I was at least two thousand years out of date! I have no desire to be in step with the world. I have said, (and you can bear witness to this statement), if what the preacher preaches is new, it is not true. If what he teaches is novel, it is not trustworthy.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 2005)

In an earlier letter, Paul had reminded the saints in Thessalonica of the conduct of his ministry whilst among them. “Our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” [1 THESSALONIANS 2:3-8].

Thus, we see that the man of God must not only be devoid of ulterior motives in fulfilling the service to which God has appointed him, but he must not allow himself even to appear to hold ulterior motives. Let that thought sink in! The elder must take pains to avoid appearing to be motivated by hostility, or harshness, or greed, or desire for personal aggrandisement. He must seek God’s glory, doing so in a transparent fashion that reveals his dependence on the One who appointed him to this service. It should be the goal of each individual standing at the sacred desk to say, “We are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” [1 CORINTHIANS 2:17].

I appeal again to Peterson’s treatment of this passage. “I want it made clear that I’ve never gotten anything out of this for myself, and that I’m not writing now to get something. I’d rather die than give anyone ammunition to discredit me or impugn my motives. If I proclaim the Message, it’s not to get something out of it for myself. I’m compelled to do it, and doomed if I don’t! If this was my own idea of just another way to make a living, I’d expect some pay. But since it’s not my idea but something solemnly entrusted to me, why would I expect to get paid? So am I getting anything out of it? Yes, as a matter of fact: the pleasure of proclaiming the Message at no cost to you. You don’t even have to pay my expenses”⁷ [1 CORINTHIANS 2:15-18]!

Paul’s “one more thing” turns out to be a summary statement of the Faith; and that’s not a bad thing for each believer to keep in mind. It is essential that each elder always bear in mind is that his purpose must always be first and foremost to equip God’s flock in such a way that it honours Him who purchased that flock. Brother Doug Carpenter used to remind people on a regular basis, “This is not your church, it is God’s church.” By the same token, this is not Mike’s doctrine; it is the doctrine of Christ the Lord. Let each elder determine to confess publicly, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward. But if I do it unwillingly, I am entrusted with a responsibility”⁸ [1 CORINTHIANS 9:16, 17].

INCIDENTALLY — “Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.” Not only is Timothy to “guard the deposit entrusted” to him, but he is also responsible before God to avoid specific errors. The man of God must always strive to avoid error; but some errors are more serious at a given time than are other errors.

I do not mean that error is never a threat, but the degree of danger, the ability for error to insinuate itself into the teaching of the faithful, can be exaggerated for different errors at different times in the life of the churches. Few Christians that have a modicum of understanding of the grace of God will ever become Muslims or Hindus. Many will, however, be ruined by succumbing to what are known as “Christian cults” because they seem so reasonable.

⁷ Peterson, *ibid*.

⁸ Biblical Studies Press, **The NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

At the time Paul was writing Timothy, and during the earliest years of the churches, an ancient error known as “Gnosticism” was a constant threat to the faithful. That appears to be the situation confronting the Ephesian congregation at the time Paul wrote this letter. It is “the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’” that concerns the Apostle. His reference to “knowledge” appears to be a reference to Gnosticism, a distortion of the Faith that threatened the early churches. Insinuation of Gnostic doctrine prompted Paul to write this particular letter to Timothy. The Gnostics were a “Christian cult.” Incidentally, the cult of Gnosticism continues to this day, both openly identifying adherents as “Gnostics” and insisting they hold Christian credentials even while holding to Gnostic doctrine.

The existence of Gnosticism is proof that the Christian Faith attracted notice within the heathen world. Gnosticism is a half-religious, half-speculative movement that tries to combine philosophy and mythology with Christian tradition and worship. The tenets of Gnosticism are constantly shifting; however, Gnostics were generally agreed on several tenets:

1. The Supreme God is distinct from the Creator of the world.
2. The God of the Jews is not the supreme God.
3. The material world is evil and the redemption of man requires release from matter.
4. Since matter is evil, Jesus Christ did not have a true human body.⁹

From these tenets, it can be suggested that the Gnostics struggled to answer two great questions: relating to Creation, how can a spiritual Being be the creator of matter? and relating to the problem of the existence of evil, how can God be credited with permitting sin? Flowing from this latter struggle is the question of how can deliverance from sin be attained?

In that ancient day, the grave danger to the churches was Gnosticism. Multiple dangers threaten the churches in this day. I’m hard pressed to identify one danger as more serious than another. Several grave dangers to the faithful vie for attention in modern church life, however. ***The Emergent Church*** is one such error that has made serious inroads among the professed people of God. This error endeavours to use culturally sensitive approaches to reach the postmodern, unchurched population with the Christian message. Akin to this movement and preceding it was the ***Seeker Sensitive Movement***. Either movement is willing to sacrifice truth in order to gain a hearing. Willing to say what they believe outsiders want to hear, devotees of these movements have ultimately revealed themselves as superficially Christian at best.

The ***Word Faith Movement*** continues to this day, gaining a dizzying number of adherents. Televangelists such as Joel and Victoria Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Creflo Dollar, Benny Hinn, Morris Cerullo and Paul and Jan Crouch have popularised this movement. The philosophy these charlatans peddle appeals to the flesh, emphasising as if does prosperity and lives free of trouble. The primary doctrine of Word Faith may be defined as the deification of man. Of course, this appeals to the flesh. It is surprising and somewhat disconcerting, how many professed Christians watch the drivel disseminated by these individuals; and worse yet, how many of these same believers support them with their own moneys.

Permit me to name as one final invasive movement that has infiltrated the faithful today the concept of ***Moralistic Therapeutic Deism***. This term was coined to describe the faith of modern teens, but it is actually descriptive of much of contemporary evangelical church life. The concept has as tenets:

⁹ Leighton Pullan, **Early Christian Doctrine, Third Edition** (Oxford Church Text Books, Edwin S. Gorham, New York, NY 1905) 42-47

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.¹⁰

Timothy was warned to twist away from specific expressions of the sin that had infiltrated the churches of that day. Similarly, the man of God in this day must be aware of error and avoid it at all costs. The wicked become sinuous in turning from the Gospel; and the elder must neither follow such devious individuals nor step on such errant paths. The man of God requires continual vigilance to avoid the errors that threatened the congregations of the faithful. Timothy would have already witnessed some who “swerved from the Faith”; and now he must beware lest he, also, be drawn aside.

The man of God is responsible before God and by His grace, to keep himself from straying into errant paths. Should he swerve aside, he will deceive many who look to him and lead them into error that can destroy their souls. Pointedly, Timothy was to avoid “irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge.’” The word Paul uses [*kenophōnía*] is a compound word composed of the words *kenós* (“empty”) and *phōnē* (“voice”). It points to talk that has no real content. It pictures talk that consists of empty words strung together in a form of vacuous babble.

Here is an example of “irreverent babble” from a modern theologian. Thomas J. J. Altizer popularised the “God is Dead” movement in my lifetime. Here is an example of his ridiculous “god talk” jargon. See if you can make sense of it. “Insofar as an eschatological epiphany of Christ can occur only in conjunction with a realization in total experience of the kenotic process of self-negation, we should expect that epiphany to occur in the heart of darkness, for only the universal triumph of the Antichrist can provide an arena for the total manifestation of Christ. Thus the Christian must finally rejoice in the advent of a total darkness, because the Christian knows the reign of the Antichrist as the darkness before the dawn, a darkness that must ultimately pass away by being transfigured into light.”¹¹ What is amazing is the number of pseudo-theologians who imagine they are brilliant because they can be so inane, so half-baked, so lame brained.

Multiplied false teachers in the Ephesian Church made the need to expose them all the more urgent. Similarly, the popularity of these same false teachings makes the task of exposing them urgent today. I could wish that I was able to give myself to focusing solely on the great doctrines of the Faith, instructing the people of God in those grand teachings. Unfortunately, I am constantly compelled to confront error, exposing it. To be certain, I want to speak with a heart of love that warns the hearers against stumbling into error, and I do want to present the pure words of the Faith; nevertheless, the demand is ever before me as a teacher and a preacher. I am under biblical constraint, for the Word commands, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” [**EPHESIANS 5:11**].

¹⁰ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, **Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers** (Oxford University Press, New York, NY 2005) 162-3

¹¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1966)

Failure to expose these wicked works, or worse still, stumbling into these deviant paths, can only result in a denial of the Christian Faith. That appears to have already been taking place in Ephesus. Did you notice Paul's sad commentary on the condition of some within that assembly? "By professing ['the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge'] some have swerved from the faith" [1 TIMOTHY 6:21a].

Look carefully at the text and you will note a further matter of some significance. Paul warns Timothy, "Avoid *the* irreverent babble." Did you notice the definite article? Clearly, Paul is focused on some specific statements, or some particular teaching that was current in Ephesus. Though the Apostle addressed a specific error—Gnosticism, the principle must be applied to similar errors insinuating themselves into the fabric of the churches in this day. For this reason, the man of God must not shrink from exposing error.

Timothy was not even to entertain discussing these errors, for doing so would only lend credence to what the errors purported to present. I come from a scientific background, as you know. We discussed theories and concepts to tease out the truth. However, the man of God is not to tease out the truth, he holds the truth and he is to declare the truth that He has received. Remember, Timothy was charged to "guard the deposit entrusted" to him. Likewise, the contemporary elder is charged with "guard[ing] the deposit entrusted" to him. He has no warrant to engage in specious arguments or "foolosophy" popularised by lost and wicked individuals.

The modern tendency of engaging in dialogue with wickedness makes no sense in light of Scripture. This is the thrust of John's cautionary words, "This is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works" [2 JOHN 6-11].

Here is the deplorable, deadly truth that must be stated again: those who swerve from the Faith seldom do so deliberately. Few set out to find error and to embrace error. Few who hold to the Faith set out to abandon the Faith. They turn aside and begin to drift. Remember the warning penned by the unknown author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians. "We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it" [HEBREWS 2:1].

Before drawing the message to a conclusion, I note one further seemingly minor matter. "By professing ['the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge'] some have swerved from *the* faith" [1 TIMOTHY 6:21a]. Paul is not saying that those swerving into errant paths have ceased to believe, he says they have swerved from the Faith, from the message of life. They have begun to embrace error, believing that God approves of what they are doing. The deposit that is entrusted to the elder must be taught to the flock. The message that God intervened in human history, that man ruined by the fall of our first parents can be redeemed and set free from condemnation, that God sent His own Son to present His life as a sacrifice for sinful people, that Christ conquered death and rose from the dead, that the Risen Saviour ascended on high where He is seated at the right hand of the Father, that Jesus Himself—and not another—shall come again to take to Himself those whom He has redeemed, that God now calls lost people to life in the Beloved Son and that the True and Living God has given us a perfect revelation of His will in this divine book is to be taught to all people. This is the elders' task.

With a grieved heart I observe that some who even now sit under the teaching of the Word—even in this assembly—are liable to “drift away.” You have flirted with error, and when you sampled it you found it pleasing to your heart. Even now you dabble in these errors, because the pain of confessing your sinful acts is more than you are willing to bear. Even though you know and believe that God will forgive you and restore you to intimacy with Him, you are unwilling to turn to Him. With a heart of love that would do you good and not evil, I warn you that you must take care that you do not swerve from the Faith. And though you say you would never do that, the slide into error takes place far more easily than you could ever imagine.

If you would avoid error, it will be necessary for you to reject all known error and to make yourself familiar with the Word. Few modern Christians read the Word, much less memorise the Word. Families have ceased praying together; and churches seldom conduct prayer meetings in this day. It is a sorrowful statement to make, but too few pulpits in this day are diligent in presenting the Word, insisting that it must not be compromised. And the members and those attending the churches love to have it so. However, you must demand that your elder hold to and contend for “the Faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” [see JUDE 3].

GRACE BE WITH YOU — “Grace be with you.” We find a standard closing for the letter. In fact, the same closing is used for Colossians [COLOSSIANS 4:18] and 2 Timothy [2 TIMOTHY 4:22]. It is quite possible that because of changes in our English tongue, we miss an important point. This letter has been addressed to Timothy. Consequently, it is possible that some fail to apply to their own lives what Paul has written because they believe his words are directed to an individual. Therefore, we would expect that he would close the letter by saying, “Grace be with you,” understanding that he was addressing Timothy. However, the final pronoun is plural. The final greeting is to (at a minimum) the assembly in Ephesus. We understand, then, that this letter was intended to be shared with the congregation. Paul’s closing indicates that the letter was intended for all believers, including the churches of this day late in the Age of Grace.

This is an important point for us to hear today—we must not neglect the instructions provided to Timothy. The threats to the Faith two thousand years ago are threats still. The congregation of the righteous does not consist of a preacher speaking to a group of dozing parishioners, saying what lulls them into ever deeper slumber. The assembly of the faithful is the Body of Christ. If you are in this congregation, is it because God appointed you to it? Or did you join out of a desire to advance some personal interest? If you are a Christian born from above, the Spirit of God gifted you with divine gifts that are necessary for the Body of Christ to function properly. The church is not made up of a group of power brokers who have decided to hire someone who will say what they want to hear. The Church of the Living God is composed of redeemed people who are appointed to serve one another as God has determined.

Paul warned of a day “when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” [2 TIMOTHY 4:3, 4]. It often seems as if that dreadful day is upon us. If you are one of God’s blood-bought saints, you are responsible to adhere to the Truth. You are not to grumble about the message if it is errant; you are to confront the errant preacher, holding him accountable for what is taught. You are not to complain if the messenger deviates from righteousness; you are responsible to insist that he act with integrity. In the same way, the elder who stands before the flock of God must ensure that he speaks the truth in love on every occasion. He is responsible to study the Word with diligence while seeking the mind of the Master, and out of the overflow of his study deliver to the flock rich nourishment.

Though the enemies of the Faith rage against the Word of the Lord, the Gospel stands. And God still has His servants whom He has appointed standing firm against the senseless rage of this dying world. Mayors of major cities demand that preachers cease declaring the Gospel of Christ the Lord and that they conform to the immoral attitudes the cities have embraced. God still gives grace to those whom He loves, ensuring that they will continue firm in the Faith. Thus, until the final day when Christ calls His people to Himself, the Faith will continue.

And what of you who hear the message this day? Where do you stand? Are you even now swerving into foreign paths that lead to destruction? Are you turning aside from the Faith of Christ the Lord because you seek an easy way to Glory? Heed this word from the writer of the Letter to Hebrew Christians. “Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy” [HEBREWS 12:12-16a].

Let me ask you pointedly whether you now enjoy the grace of God? Has He redeemed you, giving you life in His Beloved Son? That life is offered to all who will place themselves under the reign of King Jesus. Have you done this?

The Word of God informs us that God sent His Son to offer His life as a sacrifice because of sinful people. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, presented Himself in your place; He took your punishment so that you might receive the grace of God. The Word of God testifies, “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21].

Knowing that life is offered and possessing life is not the same thing. Life is offered to all who will receive it; and that life is in the Person of Christ Jesus. This is the message of God. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10]. As you well know, Paul concludes that promise by citing the Prophet Joel. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:13]. Have you received Him? Are you alive in Him? Be saved, today. Amen.