

2 TIMOTHY 2:14-19

HANDLING GOD'S WORD

“Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.’”¹

There is “handling the Word of Truth,” and there is “rightly handling the Word of Truth.” The difference between these two concepts is as vital as life and death. Mishandling the Word of Truth jeopardises both those who hear and those who are doing the handling. Tragically, mishandling the Word of Truth may be more common in the pulpits of this day than we might otherwise imagine.

The concept of “rightly handling the Word of Truth” has entered the lexicon of the Faith. Whatever else we think the concept means, this emphasis demonstrates the reality that the Faith is a word-based entity. In other words, right doctrine is essential if we will please God. What is believed, and thus, what is taught to those who seek to understand the will of God, is communicated through the Word. The church that fails to provide sound exposition of the Word of God is failing both parishioners and those who are outside the precincts of grace, leaving both vulnerable to spiritual loss and quite possibly condemning them to eternal loss. We know that “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” [ROMANS 10:17].

When Paul confronted the Christians of Galatia because they were departing the Faith, he pointed again to this word-based aspect of the Faith. The Apostle asked, “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith” [GALATIANS 3:2]? Underscore in your mind that ultimate phrase, “hearing with faith.” This concept will be used again when he asks, “Does He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith” [GALATIANS 3:5]? The Apostle reminds the saints in Corinth, “It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:21].

The message is essential if sinners are to be saved. It is of no consequence what I think is important concerning the will of God—God sets the standard for what is pleasing to Him. Neither am I able to excuse unbelief as though there is no urgency for the lost to believe the message of life. The message of salvation must be that which God has delivered in His Word. Our children are vulnerable, our friends are under sentence of death and our colleagues are dependent upon us to ensure that the love of God is communicated without distortion. Your thoughts concerning how you imagine you will serve the Son of God are of no consequence. My ideas of what I will do are futile in honouring God; your conception of what is pleasing to God is worthless. What matters is whether each of us does what God commands. This is the meaning of Jesus’ teaching, “You are My friends if you do what I command you” [JOHN 15:14].

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Obviously, knowing the will of God is vital; however, doing the will of God is essential. The primary labour of the elder is to instruct those who hear his message to do what pleases God. Paul's missives to Timothy speak primarily of matters related to conducting oneself in the pastorate; this is why these are known as "Pastoral Letters." No one should assume, however, that because these are Pastoral Letters they have nothing to say to those who are not elders. Congregational members are responsible to know what God expects of the elder, holding the elder accountable before God for what is taught and the manner in which he conducts his life. These Pastoral Letters are not written for elders only—they are given for all the people of God!

REMINDE THEM OF THESE THINGS — In the text, the Apostle Paul enjoins the young pastor, "Remind them of these things." We might properly ask, "What things?" "These things" refers to the truths that Paul has just delivered in this missive. "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for:

'If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—'

"for he cannot deny himself" [2 TIMOTHY 2:8-13].

We studied these verses in earlier messages as we worked our way through this letter.² We know what is necessary for the preacher to keep before the people of God; nevertheless, it is essential that we refresh our memories. The message of the pulpit must always be Jesus Christ! The message must point the listener to the Son of God. It is commonly said of great preachers that they take a text and make a bee-line to Jesus Christ. The one who rightly handles the Word of God will of necessity point those who listen to Christ Jesus the Lord.

I have often stated that those who come to the House of God do not seek a dissertation on economics; any first year student of economics will do a better job teaching economics than any preacher. I cannot understand those who purport to stand behind the sacred desk wasting time lecturing on economic matters. Let God grip the heart of listeners and that individual will endeavour to arrange her financial affairs to honour the King of kings. Those attending the services of the congregation do not come to hear a lecture on science. Most people were bored out of their minds when they had to study the sciences. When God has seized the heart of an individual, that one will know that God calls all things into being; and he will know that those who deny God only attempt to exclude Him because they are afraid to know Him. People do not come to the church to be entertained. The world will always provide better entertainment than we can provide; we don't have enough money to amuse people as the world amuses them. We can excel in declaring freedom in Christ! We can excel in pointing lost sinners to life in Christ.

² Michael Stark, "Remember Jesus Christ!" (Sermon), 27 December 2015, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2-Timothy-2.08-09-Remember-Jesus-Christ.pdf>; Michael Stark, "One Holy Purpose," (Sermon), 24 January 2015, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2-Timothy-2.10-One-Holy-Purpose.pdf>; Michael Stark, "A Hymn Without a Melody," (Sermon), 28 February 2016, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2-Timothy-2.11-13-A-Hymn-Without-a-Melody.pdf>

There is incredible pressure on those who preach the Word to be entertaining. "Tell us what we want to hear," the crowd demands. "Affirm us. Tell us how good we are. Tell us how God is pleased with us." However, the Apostle makes it plain that declaring the Gospel may well entail suffering, even being bound with chains. This is not a message the world wants to hear. We want a message that shows what good people we are. We want a message that tells us what a great job we are doing and how honoured God is to have people like us as Christians. Nevertheless, the message that is needed is the old message of mankind ruined by the fall and redeemed by the blood of Christ Jesus.

Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,
For I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.

Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in;
That wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon;
The early dew of morning has passed away at noon.³

Harry Ironsides related the story that was first told by a prominent London clergyman. The minister told his congregation that one night when he was just ready to retire there came a knock at his door, and when he went downstairs, he found at the door a poor, wretched little girl, dripping wet because she had come through the storm. She asked, "Are you the minister?"

"Yes," he said, "I am." Understand that he was at that time one of those pitiful preachers who had turned away from the simplicity of the gospel. Thus, he was startled when the little girl pleaded, "Well, won't you come and get my mother in?"

That noted minister replied, "Why, I was just about to retire, and besides it is hardly seemly for me to go out and get your mother in. If she is drunk, you can get a policeman to get her in. He has his oilskins on and is prepared for the storm."

"Oh," she said, "you don't understand! My mother is not out in the storm, she is not drunk, she is at home dying and she is afraid to die. She is afraid she is going to be lost forever, and she wants to go to heaven and doesn't know how. I told her I would get a minister to get her in."

That prominent clergyman tentatively asked where she lived, and she told him of a district so vile that even in the daytime respectable people did not go there without a policeman accompanying them. "Why," he said, "I cannot go down there tonight." Subconsciously he said, "It would be all my reputation is worth to be seen with a girl like this in that district in the middle of the night; no, I cannot go. As the preacher of this great and important church, what would my people think if it should get into the papers?"

To the girl he said, "I will tell you what to do. You go down and get the man who is running the Rescue Mission; he will be glad to help you." The minister said he felt ashamed as he said it, but he thought his reputation had to be maintained.

"He may be a good man," she said, "but I don't know him. I told my mother I would get a real minister, and I want you to come and get her in. Come quickly; she's dying."

³ Arabella Catherine Hankey, "Tell Me the Old, Old Story" 1866

"I couldn't stand the challenge in those eyes," the preacher said, "I felt so ashamed, and so said to her, 'Very well, I will come.'" He went upstairs and dressed and put on his greatcoat, and then the girl led him down through the city and into the slum district, into an old house, up a rickety stairway and along a long dark hall into a little room, and there lay the poor woman.

"I have gotten the preacher of the biggest church in the city," said the girl; "he will get you in; he didn't want to come, but he's come. You tell him what you want, and do just what he tells you to do."

The woman looked up and said, "Oh, sir, can you do anything for a poor sinner? All my life I have been a wicked woman, and I am going to hell, but I don't want to go there; I want to be saved, I want to go to heaven. Tell me what I can do."

The doctor, relating the incident in a large meeting said, "I stood there looking down at that poor anxious face, and thought, 'Whatever will I tell her?' I had been preaching in my own church on salvation by character, by ethical culture, by reformation, and I thought, I can't tell her about salvation by character, for she hasn't any; I can't tell her about salvation by ethical culture, for there's no time for culture, and besides she most likely wouldn't know what I meant; I can't tell her about salvation by reformation, for she has gone too far to reform. Then it came to me, 'Why not tell her what your mother used to tell you? She's dying, and it can't hurt her, even though it does her no good.'" And so I said, "My poor woman, God is very gracious, and the Bible says, 'God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life'" (John 3:16).

"She said, 'Does it say that in the Bible? My! This ought to help get me in. But, sir, my sins! What about my sins?'

"It was amazing the way the verses came to me, verses I had learned years ago and never used, and I said, 'The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin' (1 John 1:7). 'All sin?' she said. 'Does it really say that the blood will cleanse me from all sin? That ought to get me in.'

At last the preacher said, "'This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief' (1 Tim. 1:15). 'Well,' she said, 'If the chief sinner got in, I can come. Pray for me!' I knelt down and prayed with that poor woman and got her in, and while I was getting her in, I got myself in. We two poor sinners, the minister and the dying prostitute, were saved together in that little room."⁴

What a dreadful thing it shall be for a minister who has failed to speak of Christ the Lord, pointing those who listen to life in the Beloved Son. Upon that man's dying bed, spectres and shades shall draw near, accusing him of lese majesté against the Great King. They shall speak, "Ah! You are dying. Remember how many times I sat before you, listening to you. Never once did you tell me to escape the coming wrath! You talked about things that I could not understand, things that could never deliver my soul, things that are meaningless in eternity. Now, you are joining me in hell because you were unfaithful!" That man distributed poison to children rather than the Bread of Life. He offered a cup of sewage rather than the refreshing water of life.

Parents, will your children bless you because you pointed them to life in Christ the Lord? Or will they curse your memory because you confirmed them in their unbelief, excusing yourself because you didn't want to hurt their feelings or influence their decision. It is your responsibility to influence them for good and for God. How many of your colleagues with whom you've shared the workbench will be shut out of the Heaven because you failed to point them to Christ.

⁴ H. A. Ironside, **Addresses on the Epistles of John** (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ 1931), 85–88

What a marvellous opportunity is given each Sunday School teacher to honour the Lord through telling scholars of the Son of God. It will undoubtedly be sweet when that inevitable day comes to recall that you will not go into Heaven to meet the Son of God only. Perhaps it shall be a girl you once taught who will meet you, taking your hand and effusing, "Thank you, Teacher, for telling me of Jesus the Saviour." How wonderful should you be able to recall that a little lad knelt to receive the Saviour through your teaching. Happy the prospect of meeting a whole band of young spirits emancipated from the wickedness and bondage of this broken, sinful world. Such thoughts often cheer me.⁵

However, there is another, darker side that must be stated. Shortly after arriving in this community, I visited in the home of a prominent couple in our community. I asked about their relationship with Christ the Lord. "Oh, we're okay," the man assured me, "we taught Sunday School in a certain church in this community; we've done our service and we're done with that." The man and his wife assured me that they no longer attended any church; they were adamant that their lack of attendance was unimportant. They assured me that they no longer believed what the church taught, even speaking disdainfully of their former congregation. Nevertheless, they were assured that they were okay because they had once taught children. What that man and his wife taught could only have damned young men and women. Do we wonder why so many youth turn from the Faith to pursue their own desires? Too many among the churches taught with what can only be said to be a cavalier, supercilious disdain for the truths of God; they substituted their own imaginations for truth, condemning all who adopted their approach.

CHARGE THEM BEFORE GOD — The Apostle instructs elders, "Charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" [2 TIMOTHY 2:14, 15].

It is tragically easy for a preacher to ride his hobby horse. This is especially true when the preacher delivers textual sermons or topical sermons. Textual and topical sermons can be legitimate—they have a place in the repertoire of the pulpiteers. However, for building strong saints, instructed in righteous and in the knowledge of the will of God, expository messages are needed. Let the man of God take a portion of the Word—whether a sentence, a verse, a paragraph or a chapter, investing hard work to discover what the first readers of that portion of the Word understood the writer to be saying and then applying what is written to contemporary life. A grand plan is to begin with a book or a particular pericope, preaching through that portion until he has thoroughly covered what is written. The pulpit is no place for quarrelling about words. As the Apostle says in unequivocal terms, such actions can only ruin the hearers.

Throughout the Evangelical Zion are churches that want to argue about which Bible must be used. Far too many churches anathematise fellow Christians because they choose to read a different translation of the Bible from that which is used in the pulpit; it is a form of ecclesiastical censorship. Others demonise fellow Christians because they recite prayers rather than praying extemporaneously. Still others wish to dictate dress, especially women's dress, for worship. We twist and distort Bible doctrines, defining churchy words to fit our various agendas while censuring believers who question our position. Can we not see that we are destroying fellow believers because of our own perverse pride? We persist in our pig-headed, stubborn pursuit of our private agendas even though we know we are harming other believers.

⁵ See C. H. Spurgeon, **The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons**, vol. 4 (Passmore & Alabaster; James Paul; George John Stevenson; George Gallie, London; Glasgow 1858), 223–224

Even here we have witnessed some who exalted themselves as superior saints. Some have censured others as cowardly when they sought to be gentle. Of course those wishing to label others were exalted in their own eyes; these brave souls are quite prepared to form a church of one, because they alone are right! Others will not worship with the people of God because the songs and hymns are all wrong. If a hymn isn't printed with shaped notes, then they cannot sing. Or they are offended because the wrong person leads in singing hymns! Instead of rejoicing at the expanding participation in worship, they quit the services of the church because things are not conducted according to their estimate of how things should be. People have ceased worship saying that no one can worship with guitars or with drums! Such silliness must be stopped!

Others have determined that the preaching must be conducted in a particular fashion. The presentation of the Word must not last beyond fifteen minutes. Don't make people feel uncomfortable; make them feel good about themselves. The preacher must not lift his voice. He must ensure that he speaks in a soothing voice. Enough! We must submit to the Word.

While it is true that a message can be composed in a matter of minutes, most will require considerable work. Asked on one occasion how long he required to prepare a sermon, Doctor Norris responded, "A lifetime." The message that is delivered to a congregation is the composite of a lifetime of study and of walking with the Lord Jesus. The service of speaking on behalf of the Living Son of God means that the preacher must invest time in the Word with God. The man of God will be compelled to spend time in prayer, time grappling with what is written so that he does not distort the Word through carelessness or through submitting to denominational norms.

Paul says, "Do your best." The Greek term conveys the concept of performing a task "with intense effort and motivation."⁶ The original readers would have understood that the Apostle was calling the elder "to work hard, to do one's best, to endeavour." Paul would use this identical word when he wrote in the Ephesian Letter, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, *eager* to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" [EPHESIANS 4:1-3].

Redeemed saints are to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." As Christians, we are to invest ourselves in maintaining the unity of the Body. Maintaining the unity of the Spirit is hard work precisely because we are fallen creatures. Thus, God instructs us to labour to ensure that this unity is maintained. It means that when matters don't go our way, we are to find what makes for peace rather than quitting. It means that we are responsible to quit listening to disgruntled complaining, seeking rather to encourage others whilst working to keep the unity of the Spirit. This is an injunction that we easily forget in our "me first" culture.

In the Letter to Roman Christians, Paul gives a series of admonitions to the saints. "We have different gifts according to the grace given to us. If the gift is prophecy, that individual must use it in proportion to his faith. If it is service, he must serve; if it is teaching, he must teach; if it is exhortation, he must exhort; if it is contributing, he must do so with sincerity; if it is leadership, he must *do so with diligence*; if it is showing mercy, he must do so with cheerfulness"⁷ [ROMANS 12:6-8 NET BIBLE]. Focus on the statement concerning leadership. The leader must conduct himself with diligence. The New English Bible translates this verse, "If you are a leader, exert yourself to lead."⁸

⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains** (United Bible Societies, New York 1996), 661

⁷ Biblical Studies Press, **The NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, 2005)

⁸ **The New English Bible** (Oxford University Press; Cambridge University Press, New York 1970)

Underscore in your mind, then, that the Apostle is insisting that the preacher must exert himself to excel. It means that first and foremost he is to be a preacher. It is not the responsibility of the preacher to chase after popularity in the community, always endeavouring to be "hail fellow, well met" and praying over every turtle race hosted in the community. The man of God must make every effort to know the will of God and then courageously declare that will so that those who listen know the responsibility that attends following the Saviour.

As he brings this final letter to Timothy to a close, Paul instructs the elder how he must conduct himself in the ministry of preaching. "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming 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 4:1-4].

Preaching is demanding work; the message the preacher brings stings, stripping away carefully crafted façades. Though he seeks to be gentle, the message confronts us in our sinful condition, calling us to repentance. We want to be seen as nice people; yet, before the Living God we know we are sinners. We are redeemed, but we know that our salvation is all of grace; we have nothing of which we may boast. Therefore, the message of the Gospel will inevitably sting as God continues His perfect work through the preaching of the Word. For this reason, the preacher must be steeled to "tell people what they need to do," "tell them when they are wrong," "encourage them with great patience and careful teaching."⁹ This is the preacher's onerous task.

In the passage to which I just referred, did you notice the prophecy the Apostle gives? "There will be a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. Instead, following their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves, because they have an insatiable curiosity to hear new things. And they will turn away from hearing the truth, but on the other hand they will turn aside to myths"¹⁰ [2 TIMOTHY 4:3, 4].

Lest you should imagine that such resistance to the teaching of the Word is a phenomenon unique to the Church Age, consider what God said through Isaiah.

"And now, go, write it before them on a tablet
and inscribe it in a book,
that it may be for the time to come
as a witness forever.
For they are a rebellious people,
lying children,
children unwilling to hear
the instruction of the LORD;
who say to the seers, 'Do not see,'
and to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophesy illusions,
leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.'"

[ISAIAH 30:8-11]

⁹ See **The Everyday Bible: New Century Version** (Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN 2005)

¹⁰ **NET Bible**, Ibid.

“Do not prophesy to us what is right.” “Speak to us smooth things; prophesy illusions.” “Leave the way, turn aside from the path; let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.” Tragically, attitudes such as those which were displayed in the days of Isaiah’s service are not confined to that ancient day. Such attitudes could be recorded in far too many contemporary churches. It is not a sin of liberal churches alone; this sin is found too often among Evangelicals. In the face of such attitudes, the preacher who will please God must charge the flock of God to cease doing evil and to embrace righteousness. Because his task is demanding, the preacher must steel himself to do the work to which God has appointed, knowing that as he fulfils his service he will face push-back from the very people to whom he is sent.

When Paul says “charge them,” he uses a word that indicates instructing with regard to some future event or action; moreover, the word implies personal knowledge or experience.¹¹ This is a strong word that indicates urgency. When the rich man who had ignored Lazarus throughout his miserable days at last dies, he pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers. The word that he used was this same word that Paul uses in our text. “I beg you, father, to send [Lazarus] to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may *warn* them, lest they also come into this place of torment” [LUKE 16:27, 28].

Let me point to a couple of pertinent points that could be overlooked if we are not careful. The preacher is responsible to stand before the Lord—that is the implication of the statement that he is “to present” himself. The one that is approved is a worker, he does not need to be ashamed and he rightly handles the Word of Truth. The one approved is pure; his character is not contaminated with impurity. Because he is pure in his determination to serve God, he pursues the will of God with his whole heart. We are to seek God’s approval and not the approval of man. Those who love God will approve of the man of God so long as the preacher follows hard after the Lord who has appointed him.

Because the preacher is a worker, he will do his best to prepare solid expositions. His effort will be apparent to those who listen. He will have dug deeply into the Word, mining the precious so that those who listen are enriched and made strong in this Holy Faith.

When the Apostle says the worker will have “no need to be ashamed,” we cannot help referring to the words Jesus spoke when warning those who heard Him in that ancient day. Do you recall these words spoken by the Son of God? “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” [MARK 8:34b-38].

Boldness, not being ashamed, has figured prominently in this Letter which Paul wrote. Early on he pleads with Timothy, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God” [2 TIMOTHY 1:8]. Having thus pleaded with the young preacher, Paul’s own testimony was, “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” [2 TIMOTHY 1:12]. Then, he requests that a blessing be conferred on another because he was not ashamed. “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains” [2 TIMOTHY 1:18].

¹¹ Louw and Nida, Op. cit., 436

The basis for not being ashamed before the Lord is that the preacher has rightly handled the Word of Truth. Fussing about words will surely ruin the faith of some. Shortly after the words of our text today, Paul will speak of men who were then engaged in this destructive work, stating that such “evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” [2 TIMOTHY 3:13]. The man of God must keep on handling the Word of Truth correctly, cutting a straight line while deviating neither to the left nor to the right.

AVOID IRREVERENT BABBLE — “Avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity’” [2 TIMOTHY 2:16-19].

Even a casual reading of the Pastoral Letters reveals that heresies facing the churches were surprisingly similar to those we face today. In our text, the Apostle warns about word battles, identifying such heresies as “irreverent babble” [2 TIMOTHY 2:14]. In the earlier letter to Timothy, he spoke of these same quarrels [see 1 TIMOTHY 2:8; 6:4, 5]. Titus is warned about “foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions and quarrels about the law” [see TITUS 3:9-11]. Paul also warns against empty talk that is foolish or stupid [see 2 TIMOTHY 2:14, 16, 23]. Similar warnings are found in Paul’s earlier letter to Timothy [see 1 TIMOTHY 1:6, 8-10; 5:13; 6:20] and in his letter to Titus [see TITUS 1:10; 3:9].

Errant doctrine, false teaching, was a very real problem among the early churches, just as it continues to be a problem among the churches in this day. Paul warns against those who said the resurrection was already past [2 TIMOTHY 2:18], against heterodoxy and deficient Christology [1 TIMOTHY 1:3; 2:4-6; 6:3, 5, 20, 21] and Judaizers [TITUS 1:10, 14]. In each of the Pastoral Letters, the Apostle inveighed against deviation from the truth that was being promoted by supposed elders [1 TIMOTHY 2:14; 4:1, 2; 6:3, 5; 2 TIMOTHY 2:18; 3:13; 4:4; TITUS 1:10, 12, 14; 3:3]. He insisted on the necessity of sound biblical education [1 TIMOTHY 1:7; 2:11, 12; 2 TIMOTHY 2:2; 3:6, 7; TITUS 1:9; 2:3]. Distorting the Faith for financial gain appears to have been a constant problem in those early congregations [1 TIMOTHY 6:4, 5; 2 TIMOTHY 3:2; 4:3; TITUS 1:11]. In short, despite the proximity to the Resurrection and despite the presence of Apostles, false teaching and error had invaded the churches. We must not imagine that we will be spared such assault in this day.

“Irreverent babble,” “profane chatter,” “empty speech” are all terms describing false teaching that was then beginning to infiltrate the congregation in Ephesus. The danger of false teaching, or irreverent babble as this translation reads, is two-fold—it leads people into more and more ungodliness and the error spreads like gangrene. Interestingly enough, Paul did not hesitate to name two such individuals. Those who deviate from truth become increasingly godless.

Early in my Christian walk, a movement swept through Evangelical churches. The youth of the churches were no longer interested in the teaching presented in many of the churches since it was pedantic at best. Churches sought to incorporate lively music in a misguided effort to bring back young people. About this time, a charismatic chap named Dave Berg formed communes built with people identified as “The Children of God.” Parents were at first pleased that their children were again talking about the Faith. However, the group moved quite steadily toward the most degraded practises, including what they called “Flirty Fishing,” prostitution in order to seduce unsuspecting individuals to join the group, which was then rebranded as “The Family of Love.” Wrong doctrine leads inevitably to ever greater ungodliness!

Paul also warns that “irreverent babble” “will spread like gangrene.” Paul actually appeals to the world of medicine to emphasise how invasive errant teaching is. Gangrene [*gangraina* (Greek)] is a serious problem for those so afflicted. If gangrene is not diagnosed early and treated aggressively, it will surely require amputation of the diseased limb or even result in death. Paul speaks of how aggressively such error needs to be addressed.

In the First Letter to Timothy the Apostle speaks of Hymenaeus. Paul writes, “By rejecting [faith and good conscience], some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” [1 TIMOTHY 1:19b, 20]. Paul excommunicated this man, delivering him over to Satan. Though he was no longer a part of the church, he continued to spread heresy. What is worse, some among the saints were apparently listening to this man! Therefore, the Apostle states, “Avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some” [2 TIMOTHY 2:16-18]. Though put out of the church, he was still subverting the Faith.

Among the most dangerous individuals to the congregation of the faithful are erstwhile members who were either expelled for error or who in their arrogance chose to walk away. We are warned against such individuals when John writes, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” [1 JOHN 2:19]. Such individuals are dangerous precisely because we know them. Just as a wound that is not cleansed is susceptible to developing gangrene, so error—heterodoxy and heteropraxy—is susceptible to contaminating the Body of Christ. If we will avoid amputation and great pain, we must apply the antiseptic of the Word. Healthy teaching, sound doctrine, will keep us from succumbing to spiritual sepsis.

Permit me to conclude on this comforting note. Paul writes, “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and ‘Let everyone who names the Name of the Lord depart from iniquity’” [2 TIMOTHY 2:19]. God knows those who are His. Though the evil one may sow weeds among the stalks of wheat, we are assured that God knows how to preserve the righteous and to hold the ungodly for judgement. You and I may not be able to distinguish false professors of the Faith, but God knows. We will recognise errant doctrine; and when we encounter such error, we must flee. Nevertheless, we are comforted by the knowledge that God knows those who are His.

Jesus has promised, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” [JOHN 10:27, 28]. False teachers may cause confusion among the people of God, but they cannot corrupt His people because, “[God] chose [us] as in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight” [EPHESIANS 1:4-8].

That second citation is both an admonition and an affirmation. The admonition is to know that you are to be holy. The affirmation is that because you are redeemed you will seek to honour Christ who saved you. With Paul, we can attest, “I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” [PHILIPPIANS 1:6]. Amen. Amen, indeed.