

PHILLIP D. JENSEN
1&2 TIMOTHY
FOR YOU



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With thanks to God for
Nathan Mark Phillip Barry
(2000-2017)

"The only thing that really matters is trusting Jesus."

Nathan



1 & 2 Timothy For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *1 & 2 Timothy For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- ESV: English Standard Version (This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated.)
- NIV: New International Version (2011 edition)
- NIV84: New International Version (1984 edition)
- RV: Revised Version

INTRODUCTION TO 1 & 2 TIMOTHY

The two letters Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy were inspired by God for our learning. That's why our book is called *1&2 Timothy for You*, for this is not only Paul's word to Timothy but also God's word for us.

As Paul talks to his closest colleague, these letters give us a deep insight into the thinking of the great missionary **apostle*** to the nations. Nowhere can we get closer to Paul's mind than when he's talking to his true child in the faith, Timothy. This is especially true in 2 Timothy, when Paul is coming to the end of his missionary endeavours and wishes to pass the baton on to his "son".

It would appear that nobody was closer to Paul than this younger man, Timothy. Paul repeatedly called him his child and commended him to the Philippians:

"For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel."

(Philippians 2:20-22)

Timothy's physical father was Greek, while his mother and grandmother were Jews. They lived in Lystra, and we read a brief account of Timothy's recruitment into Paul's company in Acts 16:1-3. To the modern reader, the extraordinary feature of this recruitment is that Paul **circumcised** Timothy so that his Greek parentage would not cause difficulties among the Jews. This is a level of commitment to the mission of Christ that many would balk at today.

Paul's confidence in Timothy can be seen not only in 1 and 2 Timothy and his commendation in Philippians but also in the difficult and even dangerous tasks that Paul sent him on (e.g. Acts 17:14; 18:5; 19:22; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5). While the two men were often separated, as they were when Paul wrote these letters,

* Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 199).

they also travelled together and spent time with each other (2 Corinthians 1:1; Colossians 1:1). So Paul can write to Timothy:

“You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me.” (2 Timothy 3:10-11)

However, under the inspiration of God, these letters were not for Timothy alone, for they reveal God’s plan for our lives as well. They are not restricted to the first century or to their original recipient. Paul wrote 1 Timothy with a consciousness of a wider audience than that one man; and even the more private 2 Timothy contains the apostle’s teaching, to be handed down to others who would in turn teach still others (2 Timothy 2:2). Here we see a common phenomenon in the Bible—God’s eternal word expressed in a concrete and specific situation. The situation helps us to understand the word in its context. But the word goes beyond that original context and into our lives as well. Such is the wisdom and power of the living and active word of God.

Missionary Letters

The context of 1 and 2 Timothy is the Christian mission. Christianity is missionary at heart. Jesus himself was on a mission. He was sent by his Father and “came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15). By his death and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament’s expectation of the Christ (Luke 24:44-46). Yet the mission did not finish with Christ’s death and resurrection, for Jesus’ disciples were commissioned to carry his mission to the world—the Old Testament expectation, Jesus repeated in the New, included “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

All Christians are missionaries. A missionary is not somebody who travels overseas. A missionary is somebody on a mission. The essence

is not the travel but the purpose-directed life of taking the gospel to others. Some travel far and others not at all, but all live to declare the saving work of Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be a missionary. Jesus' challenge to discipleship was to lose your life "for my sake and the gospel's" (Mark 8:35), and his understanding of this mission was not limited to the apostles but was given to "the eleven and those who were gathered with them" (Luke 24:33, 36, 45-49). That is why, when a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem arose, all the believers except the apostles were scattered, and we read, "Those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:4).

The letters, or epistles, of the New Testament are the missionary writings of the apostles as they addressed fellow believers in other parts of the first-century Greco-Roman world. As disciples, the apostles were all on the Christian mission to declare the gospel of Jesus throughout the earth. Their correspondence is gathered into the latter part of the New Testament. To understand the New Testament letters in their context and intent is to read them as missionary correspondence.

Paul in particular was the apostle to the nations (Romans 1:5; 1 Timothy 2:7). His missionary ambition was to declare the gospel where it had not been previously proclaimed (Romans 15:20). Some of his letters, like Colossians, were written to new churches that the apostle had heard about but never visited. Others, like the Corinthian letters or the letter to the Galatians, were written to Christians struggling with the issues and relationships of the changed life that their new-found faith brought. Still others, such as Romans, were written to Christians whom the apostle was hoping to visit as he travelled further west on his missionary journey of reaching places where the gospel had not yet been preached. These letters were self-consciously written not only to the intended recipients but also to the wider Christian audience (e.g. Colossians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2). All these diverse letters are part of normal missionary endeavour.

1 and 2 Timothy are classic examples of missionary letters written by an apostle, and so rightly form part of the New Testament

Introduction

missionary correspondence. In 1 Timothy Paul tells Timothy how to conduct himself in Paul's temporary absence (1 Timothy 3:14). In 2 Timothy Paul tells Timothy how to succeed him in the mission after he has gone (2 Timothy 4:1-8). They differ from other letters in that they are personal (as are Titus and Philemon). But that too is part of missionary correspondence.

Because all Christians are engaged in the mission of Christ, the letters of the great missionary apostle, Paul, are obviously important to us. In particular his advice and instructions to his closest colleague are invaluable in framing our own lives as missionaries. But even more significant is that in 1 and 2 Timothy we have God's word to us, to shape and to further grow us as we seek, like Paul and Timothy, to fulfil those ministries that the Lord has kindly given to us.

1. THE AIM IS LOVE

I always tried to make my schoolwork books as neat as possible and so I would focus hard as I began to write. But it never lasted more than two pages! Then the ink splotches, the uncontrolled letters, the spelling mistakes and the smudges would take over once more.

When preaching a new series on a book of the Bible, a similar mistake is often made—namely, to pay enormous attention to detail for the first couple of verses, while later chapters receive only a passing reference. The New Testament letters have a common formal opening, and a disproportionate amount of time can easily be spent in commenting on them.

All we need to discover is first, who wrote this letter and to whom? Then second, why did he write it and what is it all about? The first questions are answered, in part, in the opening verses—but the second questions find their answers later in the book.

The Apostle and His Child

1 Timothy **1:1-2*** starts with naming the sender (Paul) and then the recipient (Timothy), and then Paul adds his usual well-wishing greeting, wishing **grace** and peace (and, in this case, mercy) for those he's writing to (see, for example, Galatians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:2).

However, this opening greeting tells us a little more than simply that this letter was from Paul to Timothy. Paul emphasises that he is “an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Timothy **1:1**). Furthermore, he describes Timothy

* All 1 & 2 Timothy verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

as “my true child in the faith”. This could be no more than Paul’s conventional self-description, but it also serves to underline the truth about who he was and introduce what his relationship with Timothy was. This may be relevant to why he wrote and what he wrote—so let’s spend a little time considering this description.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus: An apostle was somebody who was sent on a mission—something like an ambassador. Christ’s apostles were sent to continue and implement his mission. Jesus came into the world to save sinners by his death and resurrection (1:15; 2:3-6). Thus Paul can write of “God our Saviour” (2:3; 4:10) and “Christ Jesus our hope” (1:1). The apostles’ part in the mission was to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ’s name to all nations (Luke 24:44-48). They were a band of missionaries.

Much of Paul’s life and ministry is recorded for us in Acts. Paul’s letters are missionary letters, written by an **evangelist** on his missionary journeys. (It is a common mistake to focus on the apostles’, and in particular Paul’s, missionary commission and endeavours, but fail to observe that their writings are missionary correspondence.) These are letters written to churches and individuals about the work of the gospel transforming the lives and eternity of people—letters written to colleagues and supporters who were engaged in the same mission as he was.

Paul was not one of the original 12 apostles, but rather was called later by Jesus specifically to bring the gospel message to the nations, or Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 26:17—the Greek word means “nations”, which English translators call “Gentiles” when referring to all the non-Jewish nations). This put Paul at the cutting edge of the missionary movement. He was the one “appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth” (1 Timothy 2:7). Yet the strength of his claim raises a question. Why was Paul so adamant that he was telling the truth and not lying?

Such protestation about his role shows that it is very important, and/or that it is being seriously challenged. In introducing himself in **1:1** as an apostle appointed by God and Christ Jesus, he is underlining

the truth that he was not self-appointed but divinely appointed. He came to his task of testifying to God as Saviour, preaching and teaching the Gentiles in faith and truth, with the authority of God and Christ Jesus.

Timothy, my true child in the faith: At first glance, there is nothing strange about whom Paul was writing to (v 2). Yet, as we think about Paul's relationship with Timothy, his protestation that he was telling the truth and not lying (2:7) appears very peculiar. Surely his "true child in the faith", of all people, would know that Paul was appointed as a preacher, apostle and teacher of the Gentiles?! Why the protestation?

Timothy was not Paul's biological son, but he was his spiritual child. Paul was Timothy's mentor as Timothy was Paul's protégé. Nobody knew Paul's work better than Timothy. Paul wrote to the Philippians about him, saying, "I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel" (Philippians 2:20-23). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul reminded him of how closely they had lived, travelled and worked together (2 Timothy 3:10-11). So it is surprising that Paul has to assure Timothy that he is not lying when he claims to be "an apostle and teacher of the Gentiles" (1 Timothy 2:7).

It was surprising to the first-century Jewish world that God would appoint an apostle to the Gentiles. The other apostles found it an astonishing idea, and had to be persuaded through the extraordinary conversion of Cornelius that mission to Gentiles was even possible, let alone desirable (Acts 10 – 11). Even then, they were greatly troubled by the inclusion of non-Jews in the kingdom (Acts 15) and the implications for issues like circumcision and food laws (see Galatians 1:11 – 2:21).



Paul is underlining the truth that he was not self-appointed but divinely appointed.

Today, we live in the success of Paul's apostolic ministry. Nobody now doubts you can be a Christian without being Jewish. Just the reverse—many modern Jews find it difficult to believe that you can be Jewish and Christian. Yet in the earliest days of Christianity, all the Christians were Jews, and no Gentile was a Christian. So it is not surprising that Paul has to emphasise that he is not lying when he talks of his call to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

But still, while it may surprise others, Timothy, his "child in the faith", should not have been at all surprised. So why the great emphasis on Paul's apostolic role in a letter to Timothy?

The best explanation is that this letter is not a private correspondence but intended to be a public letter of recommendation for Timothy—something like us giving a reference for someone to a potential new employer. Timothy is facing the difficult task of waging the good warfare and fighting the good fight (1 Timothy 1:18; 6:12). He has to charge certain people not to teach different **doctrines (1:3)**. He is going to have to teach and give commands (4:11; 6:2, 17). He is going to have to deal with disciplining elders and commanding rich people (5:20; 6:17). He has to deal with people older than himself who could be tempted to despise him for his youth (4:12; 5:1). This letter would give him the backing of the apostle, both to him personally and to anybody to whom he cared to show it. (As an aside, there is another little indication that this was more a public than private letter. In the very last verse of the letter we read, "Grace be with you" (6:21). In the Greek, the "you" is plural.)

This leads us on to our next question: namely, why Paul wrote the letter—and that will take us deeper into the letter to find the answer.

Why Paul Wrote to Timothy

Timothy would need such a letter of recommendation from the apostle, not just because of the opposition he was likely to face but also because he was holding the fort during the apostle's delay.

There was nothing new in this for Timothy. When Paul went to Macedonia, Timothy had to stay in Ephesus and contend with false teachers (1:3). (**Verses 3-4** appear to be an unfinished sentence. Most translations resolve the problem by assuming that Paul is describing Timothy's present situation as being in Ephesus. However, the reference to Ephesus is in the past tense, and may be referring to an earlier situation that is parallel to Timothy's present task. This is lent support by the facts that Ephesus is not referred to again in the letter—Paul makes no reference to Timothy's locality to explain his instructions—and there is such an emphasis on universality in the letter. It would seem that Timothy's locality is not a particularly significant part of the context by which to understand the letter.)

Paul had hoped to come to Timothy soon, but now he was possibly going to delay his arrival. That delay is the reason Paul gives for writing this letter: "I hope to come to you soon, but 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, a pillar and **buttress** of the truth" (3:14-15).

Here is Paul's explicit reason for writing to Timothy. If we are to understand the letter, we must pay careful attention to this passage.

Paul does not specify why he may choose to delay joining Timothy. Whatever the reason, Paul wants his protégé to exercise Christian leadership in his absence. Though Timothy was young and to some extent inexperienced, Paul had confidence in him. There were prophecies made about him (1:18), and he had been given an appropriate gift when the council of elders laid their hands upon him (4:14). He has to put the gift and prophecies into effect. Paul knew of Timothy's character and convictions. He knew of the good **confession** he had made in the presence of many witnesses (6:12). He knew Timothy by the Old Testament title given to someone who was a leader of God's people—a "man of God" (6:11).

So, leaving his protégé to do his tasks, Paul writes to him about "how one ought to behave" (3:15); especially as one who has responsibility

to teach, urge and command others. It is not about how he may like to behave but about the moral imperative of how he ought to behave. It is about behaviour or conduct or manner of life.

And the context in which this behaviour is being commanded is the household and church of God. Both the words “house” and “church” need to be read in their wider sense of God’s people: a household and a gathering. God’s people are his household or family, who gather and assemble in his name. They are not two things but one and the same: “the household ... which is the church” (v 15). Just as we mustn’t think of the house and church as buildings, so we are not to think of a nuclear family or an institutional organisation such as a **denomination** or world church. All God’s people are united to him and each other by a common rebirth through the Holy Spirit’s application of the gospel to our lives. And all God’s people are gathered together around Christ Jesus to hear his word of grace in the heavenly church. This is modelled on what we might call the Old Testament “Day of the Church” (Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10; 10:4—see also Hebrews 12:18-24). Whenever and wherever on earth Christians gather in God’s name to hear his word, they are God’s church—his assembly. Paul is writing to the man of God to tell him how to conduct himself in such a household.

This is not about any old household but God’s household. And it’s not any old gathering but God’s church. It is not any old god but the true and living God, in whose household and gathering Timothy is learning how to behave. The importance is in God—living and true—rather than the house or church. For their importance can be overstated. (In the Greek, neither “household” nor “church” have the word “the” in front of them. The important character of each is that they are God’s, not that they are the one and only.) This becomes significant when we look at the next phrase about God’s church: “a pillar and buttress [or foundation] of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). The church is not *the* pillar and buttress of the truth; that is to give it too high a status and importance. God’s church is a pillar and buttress of

the truth. The truth therefore matters to the church and is important as regards behaviour within the church.

For Paul, as for all Christians, the truth is found in the gospel. When he says that God desires all people to be saved, he continues, "... and to come to the knowledge of [the] truth" (2:4). Paul is a teacher of the Gentiles "in faith and truth" (2:7), just as Christians are those who "believe and know the truth" (4:3). On the other hand, the false teachers are "deprived of the truth" (6:5), and their knowledge is "false" (6:20).

It is the importance of the truth to church life and behaviour in the church that gives rise to the final verse of chapter 3. It introduces to us our third topic: what this letter is about.

What Paul Writes About

3:16 is the most important verse in the book, and yet it comes like a bolt out of the blue and causes many a reader to scratch their heads trying to understand it.

"Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He 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."

This has all the hallmarks of poetry, a hymn or a **creed**. It is a confession of the gospel that speaks of the "the mystery of godliness". It is Paul's and Timothy's confession. The word "confession" in the original Greek is an **adverb**, not a **verb** (as in the ESV)—meaning undoubtedly, confessedly, or certainly. And the confession is that great is the mystery of godliness.

In due time we will unravel the six lines that make up this creed, but first we need to understand the phrase "the mystery of godliness".

Though nearly all modern Bibles use this phrase, both words (“mystery” and “godliness”) are unhelpful translations of the Greek.

The word “mystery” is a key term for Paul, but it is not really a translation, but more a transliteration (that is, the Greek letters have been turned into English letters to form the word “mystery”). But the

word does not really mean “mystery”, for there is nothing mysterious, **mystical**, puzzling or enigmatic about what Paul is speaking of. It is not impossible to understand, or incomprehensibly spiritual, or irrational. Paul uses the word to mean “secret”: in other words, something that was once hidden and has now been made public. For example, I may choose to hide my birthday from you. So it becomes a secret, unless and until I re-

“Mystery” is a key term for Paul, but the word does not really mean “mystery”!

veal it to you (or someone else does). Yet there is nothing particularly mysterious or mystical about it. “Mystery” is the wrong word to describe something hidden and revealed. “Secret” is the word. For Paul, the great secret was that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6). This is the essence of the argument in Ephesians 2 – 3; and this was his life’s work as the apostle to the Gentiles. This secret is found in the creed of 1 Timothy 3:16, especially the two lines which state that Jesus was “proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world”.

While “mystery” is a key word for Paul, the word “godliness” is a key word to understand 1 and 2 Timothy. It occurs some 15 times in the New Testament; 10 of them are in 1 and 2 Timothy. In Greek, it is a word that means “religion”. It is the devotion, respect or **piety** that one has towards one’s god. New Testament religion does not concentrate on tradition, buildings, institutions, rituals, statues, fasting or any of the usual devotional approaches of humans toward the divine. Christian “religion” is so different to the way other religions approach

their god that often we Christians do not even use the word of ourselves. Many years ago, Fritz Ridenour even published a best-selling book among Christians entitled *How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious*. True religion, wrote James (though he uses a different word for “religion”), is visiting widows and orphans and keeping ourselves unstained from the world (James 1:27). Therefore, Christian religion is expressed in our moral behaviour towards each other and the world.

A consequence of this aversion to the word “religion” is that we have translated it as “godliness”. But sadly, over time, because of our emphasis on the moral dimension of our godliness, we have removed the “god” element from godliness, effectively adding an extra “o”, making it “goodliness”. So we describe actions as godly or ungodly, by which we mean moral or immoral, Christian or unchristian. But the opposite of godly (in its true, biblical sense) is not “ungodly”; rather, it is “godless”, because the word “godliness” is about relating to God rightly—to the one true God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—and this involves, but is not summed up nor prefaced by, our morally right behaviour.

In fact, the great secret of godliness is found not in our approach to God but in his approach to us. It is not in our moral or religious activities, but in God’s gospel of his Son, who appeared in the flesh and was vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world and taken up in glory.

In the light of the gospel of truth and the secret of religion—that God came to us in Jesus rather than the idea that we go to him in our rituals—1 Timothy tells us how the man of God is to behave in God’s household and church. It has been essential reading down the centuries for all those who have exercised leadership in the church of the living God. It is God’s word today to us about how to conduct ourselves in the household of God.

Questions for reflection

1. What difference does it make that Paul was divinely appointed as an apostle, rather than self-appointed?
2. How does (or should) thinking about your church as “God’s household” change your attitude towards it?
3. Is the definition of “godliness” that Paul gives here in 1 Timothy different from how you have tended to think of that word? How?

PART TWO

A World in Love with Love

Our world is in love with love. And we Christians know we have a message of love. Yet, to our world, Paul's charge to Timothy sounds anything but loving: "Charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine" (1 Timothy **1:3**). Today this sounds like **doctrinaire**, censorious, narrow-minded, religiously **ideological** self-righteousness—just the kind of religious **orthodoxy** that leads to extremism and persecution. Where in Paul's charge is the tolerant inclusiveness of "love"? Where's the love in Paul telling Timothy to impose his view and what he thinks on others, in opposition to their view and what they think? Where is the open-minded freedom of thought and expression—the intellectual humility of today's enlightened society? Surely we have moved beyond somebody charging others to be silent. Where's the love in that?

It is not just love that seems to be denied by Paul's charge; it is also the modern understanding of knowledge and certainty. The last hundred years has seen a steady growth in professed uncertainty. It is true that overconfidence in one's opinion is a form of arrogance. Yet equally, uncertainty about everything is a form of nonsense. More than that, it can also be another form of arrogance, of a particularly hypocritical nature. For it pretends an intellectual humility when in fact it is a spiritual or moral unwillingness to humbly accept the truth—including the truth about God, revealed in his word. While we must be open to changing our mind in light of new information, when everything is held to be simply a matter of interpretation and opinion, there is no new information and nobody knows anything.

This **postmodern** view of truth is nothing innovative; it is as old as its "patron saint": **Pontius Pilate**. He dismissed Jesus' claim to bear witness to the truth with the very modern-sounding one-liner: "What is truth?" (John 18:38). The pragmatic politics exemplified by Pilate crucified Christ then, and it persecutes Christian conscience

now. Increasingly today, any opinion on certain sacrosanct issues that may divide or even cause any offence in our society is silenced.

Yet, says Paul, “the aim of our charge [to tell others not to teach their ‘truth’] is love” (1 Timothy **1:5**). This, then, is a passage which shows how different Christian love and knowledge are from the world’s “love” and uncertainty.

The Charge

Timothy is to charge people to stop teaching “different doctrine”. “Doctrine” simply means “teaching”. For Paul the missionary, different doctrine is false doctrine (Galatians 1:6-9). There is only one God and one mediator between God and humanity—and God’s concern is that people will be saved and come to the knowledge of truth (1 Timothy 2:4-5). Paul’s gospel may be right or wrong—but either it *is* right or it *is* wrong, and it cannot be simply a matter of opinion. If there is only one truth, then all different doctrine must be false doctrine. So in chapter 4, Paul writes of deceitful spirits and liars in contrast to “those who believe and know the truth” (4:3). In chapter 6, he warns of people who are “deprived of the truth” (6:5).

Jesus famously claimed to be “the way, and *the truth*, and the life” (my italics)—a claim backed up by a second, more exclusive claim that “no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Christians are to oppose falsehood and try to take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). Paul’s “spirit was provoked” when he saw the idolatry of Athens, and so he reasoned in the **synagogue** and in the market-place daily (Acts 17:16-17). Here in this letter, as we have seen, he is instructing Timothy on how one ought to behave in God’s household (1 Timothy 3:15). It is little wonder that Timothy, his true child in the faith, must strive for the truth, because God’s household and church is “a pillar and buttress of the *truth*” (my italics).

For a pillar and buttress of the truth to be led by false teachers is a disaster. To have the law of God taught by people who do not understand either God’s law or what they are talking about (**1:7**) is to deny

the gospel. It is like a church being led by the **blaspheming Saul of Tarsus** instead of the apostolic Paul of the Damascus road conversion.

It is extremely divisive, not to say painful, when insiders—members of the church, even old friends—become false teachers. Yet Jesus’ disciples had to face it (for instance, Acts 8:9-24; 1 John 2:18-22), and it is to be expected by every generation. Paul warned the Ephesian elders, “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).

At first glance, it doesn’t appear that Timothy is told how to charge these persons to stop their teaching. He is not given the authority of government nor any power of coercion. Yet the whole letter is about how he is to behave in such a way that he will be able to deliver this charge. It is by the prophecies made about him and the gift that God has given him by prophecy that he is to wage the good warfare and fight the good fight (1 Timothy 1:18; 4:14; 6:12). It is by devoting himself to “the public reading of Scripture, to **exhortation**, to teaching” (4:13). It is by his life and doctrine that he will save himself and his hearers (v 16). In other words, his conduct and his teaching must exemplify his stand against the false teachers.

Truth is found and taught not simply in affirmations but also, more importantly, in denials. Opposing errors highlights both the details and the importance of the truth. Yet opposing errors and those who teach them requires not only a firm grasp of the truth but also the emotional strength to keep fighting. It is no different to family life in the home. Home life should be one of peace, and most parents have a great desire for peace. But imagining that such “peace” will be secured or maintained by giving in to their children’s



Truth is found not simply in affirmations but also in denials.

demands is a surefire way to have a home not of tranquillity but of tyranny. Such peace is illusory. It is no different in God's household (though the stakes are still higher). Opposing false teaching and false teachers is a normal part of the normal Christian life, particularly for leaders, both in the family and in God's household.

The Method of False Teachers

We don't know much about the false teachers who Timothy needed to contend with. The "certain persons" (1:3) may or may not be the same as Hymenaeus and Alexander of verse 20, or those who have wandered (NIV) from the faith in 4:1 or swerved from the truth in 6:21, or who teach different doctrines in 6:3. We do not need to know precisely who they were or what they were teaching; it is sufficient to know that it was different from the gospel, and so false with regard to the teaching that accords with godliness.

We do, however, know something of what falsehood they were teaching. It involved myths, **genealogies**, law, **asceticism** and materialistic greed.

These false teachers, Paul says, "devote themselves to myths" (1:4). The ancient world was full of myths; but the New Testament is consistently anti-mythological. The word "myths" occurs five times in the New Testament (here, and in 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:14; 2 Peter 1:16), and on every occasion they are spoken of negatively. Peter emphatically denies that Christianity is based in myths: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). Christian claims are based in history, and, as in Peter's case, eyewitness evidence. Today we are often taught that all history is a matter of interpretation. To be sure, Peter interpreted what he saw as the power and coming of the Lord—as seeing his "majesty". But there was more to it than simply Peter's interpretation of what he observed, for, he recounts, "we ourselves heard" the voice from heaven, interpreting the event

for him (v 18). And even more than that, the voice quoted the Old Testament prophets, giving a whole context by which to understand the event. Thus, from the voice and the Old Testament, he was given even greater assurance of his understanding of what he observed—this was God’s interpretation, not a man’s (v 16-21). The message of the apostles may be wrong—but it is not myths. We will hear more of this rejection of myths in 1 Timothy 4.

Alongside the myths, the false teachers devoted themselves to “endless genealogies” (1:4). The Bible has a few genealogies, and they do raise quite significant questions. Why are they there? What do they teach or demonstrate? How accurate are their details? Modern genealogies have as their prime goal complete, detailed accuracy. However, the Bible’s genealogies are more **didactic** than they are a simple acquisition of endless minutiae. The first Old Testament genealogy, in Genesis 5, searches for the promised **seed** of Eve, who will crush the serpent. The first genealogy in the New Testament, in Matthew 1, gives an overview of the history of Israel from **Abraham**, through **David** and the **exile**, to Jesus. It paves the way for his extraordinary birth by (unusually) mentioning some female ancestors of the Christ—including Rahab the prostitute, Ruth the **Moabite** widow, and Bathsheba the “wife of Uriah”, with whom David committed adultery. However, genealogies by their very nature are open to endless detailed discussion and exploration, especially by obsessive people who do not know the truth and cannot see the forest for the trees. So, while the Bible does contain genealogies, we are warned both here and in Titus 3:9 to “avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless”.

Indeed, Paul underlines the worthless, unprofitable nature of the false teaching in 1 Timothy 1:6, calling the discussions “vain” (in the sense of meaningless or empty). Furthermore, he concludes the letter in 6:20 warning of “irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’”.

The Foundation of False Teachers

Herein lies something of the problem of the other teaching: it is empty, because it is founded upon spiritual failure.

The spiritual failure of false teachers is foundational to their errors. So, when Paul speaks of them wandering away “into vain discussions” (1:6) or shipwrecking their faith (1:19) or departing from the faith (4:1) or teaching “a different doctrine” (6:3), he links false teachers with spiritual and moral failure.

The false teachers in 1:6-7 have swerved from the foundational motivations of Paul and Timothy. They have wandered from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (v 6). And, having deviated from these, they have turned towards vain and empty and meaningless discussions. There are two parallel words here—“swerve” and “wander”. Both speak of missing the mark, going astray, departing and turning to another direction. It was not an immediate denial and denunciation of the gospel but a departure from its spiritual effects that led on to the emptiness of falsehood. The result of this departure is ignorant and arrogant teachers who want to be teachers of the law but do not know what they are talking about (v 7).

A similar and even greater failure is recounted at the end of the chapter, with people making a shipwreck of their faith (v 18-20). Some people, including Hymenaeus and Alexander, have rejected a good conscience and thus shipwrecked their faith. Indeed, they are in great danger of blaspheming—such danger that Paul has “handed [them] over to Satan”. Timothy, on the other hand, must hold “faith and a good conscience” (v 19). This is the way to fulfil the charge Paul is entrusting to him and to which the prophecies about him were pointing. This is the way to wage the good warfare.

The Fruit of False Teachers

The outcome of the false teaching is based on the method and foundation of the false teachers. Paul puts it this way in **verse 4**: “myths

and endless genealogies ... promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith”.

It is so easy to be engaged in an intellectual debate that you fail to pay attention to the outcome of the argument. This is especially true when the outcome is personal, relational or spiritual. The myths of the fallen world do not work towards anything positive. The endless genealogies only promote further speculations and not true knowledge of God. It is the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge” (6:20). The internet demonstrates just such anti-social debates that degenerate into slanging matches about less and less information, and less and less important truth. There is nothing wrong with the internet itself—but it does publicise and magnify the vain and empty discussions of humanity. There is nothing wrong with asking questions and seeking answers. There is nothing wrong with discussion and debate as we sharpen each other’s thinking. But some debates and discussions are so much hot air—a pooling of ignorance in the vain babble of egos trying to gain the upper hand, a constant cycle of arguing for argument’s sake.

Paul’s condemnation of this false teaching is that it does not promote the “stewardship” from God that is by faith. The stewardship of God is God’s plan of salvation—his plan and management. We get our word “economics” from the word (*oikonomia*) which is translated here as “stewardship” or “household management”. God’s stewards implement God’s stewardship, and so the word can refer to either God’s management or God’s managers. God’s plan is not worked out by clever arguments, nor by myths and genealogies. God’s stewardship is “by faith”: he is trustworthy—faithful to his word—and his stewards trust in him and his word. The whole programme of God is not about speculative myths and genealogies—it is not an intellectual game to be played. God’s programme is about salvation by faith and restored relationship with him.

The Aim of the Charge

In contrast to the speculations that leave people in meaningless talk and ignorance, the apostle's charge aims, as we have seen, at love (v 5).

Here is the hallmark of genuine Christian fellowship. Jesus said that the sign of true discipleship is love (John 13:34)—not the love of this world but the love of God. Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount that his disciples were to love, not as the world does but as God the Father does:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

(Matthew 6:44-48)

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This kind of love is so different that when people see it, they will glorify not us but the God who is at work in us; and they will recognise us as Jesus' people (Matthew 5:16; John 13:35). The Christian's love is the same as the love that is found in Jesus' sacrificial death (Romans 5:7-8; 1 John 3:16; 4:7-12). It is patient and kind, yes; it is not rude; but it “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:4, 6). It is

not loving to affirm everything and everyone. It is loving to affirm the truth that is for the good of everyone.

The Foundation of the Charge

The love that is Paul's aim issues from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:6). A “pure heart” is a clean

or cleansed heart. Christians know their heart is clean, not because of any natural purity (Jeremiah 17:9) but because it is washed clean in the precious blood of Jesus. A “good conscience” is one that is not seared as the false teachers’ consciences are (1 Timothy 4:2), but rather, is both cleansed by the blood of Christ and informed by the word of God. A conscience is a consciousness of what is good and evil, the inward faculty of knowing right and wrong and the obligation to choose the right. Once our conscience is compromised, we teach in order to justify ourselves rather than to help our hearers.

A “sincere faith” goes with both the pure heart and the good conscience. This is a non-hypocritical, sincere trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and a genuine belief in the gospel we teach. Faith is more than intellectual agreement. It includes that, but it is much more, for it involves trusting, relying and depending upon another person (or thing, or truth). The opposite of faith is not doubt but disobedience, not uncertainty so much as double-mindedness: the double-mindedness of trying to serve two masters simultaneously.

Christians are cleansed and freed to serve Christ by serving others in love (2 Corinthians 4:5; 5:14-15; Galatians 5:13-14). The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote of “the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God [and will] purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Hebrews 9:14). Charging false teachers to desist from their teaching is not consistent with this world’s version of love, but it does flow necessarily from Christ’s love. It is the kind of love that comes from the cleansed heart and the **regenerate** conscience of those who sincerely trust the gospel they preach. And it is the kind of teaching that produces not idle speculations or silly myths but the good management of the household of God, which is by faith. This stewardship is God’s plan of salvation put into effect by his stewards, like Paul and Timothy or any who preach the gospel and build the church—no less today than in Paul and Timothy’s day. Here is the secret of godliness: that Christ’s appearance and vindication, seen by angels, has been proclaimed to the nations and believed on in the world.

Questions for reflection

1. Have you witnessed or experienced teachers within the church like the ones described in these verses?
2. What damaging effects did they have? How popular were they?
3. “Here is the hallmark of genuine Christian fellowship. Jesus said that the sign of true discipleship is love (John 13:34)—not the love of this world but the love of God.” How is this world’s view of love different from God’s, and what difference does that make to you?