

The Pillar (Part 2 of 6)

How a Church Gets Off-Track

1 Timothy 1:3-5

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3 As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. 5 The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Tim 1:3-5).

“Guard the truth that leads to life.” This is the mantra of the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy and Titus), and it is the primary message of 1 Timothy. It means something rather simple but it is very significant. Namely that the church has been given a deposit of truth from God, and it must be guarded because it is the only path that leads to life. In other words, the church is the means by which a sovereign God has chosen to declare his redemptive message to the world. Therefore the church itself, what one thinks about her, how she is protected and grown, and one’s theology about her (ecclesiology) is really, really important.

Last week we started our new series on 1 Timothy called “The Pillar,” and we learned a number of important things related to the background and message of this book. Here’s quick review:

- Paul writes to a young pastor who is serving in Ephesus
- Timothy and Paul had a special relationship
- Timothy appears to be a bit timid, cautious, and fearful
- The book addresses how one should lead the church
- It focuses on five major themes: doctrine, worship, leadership, mission, and godliness

But even beyond the details of the book, we learned how important the church really is to God’s plan for redemption. The gospel, your godliness, and the glory of God are all on the line when it comes to the church. So it is something worth studying and talking about.

Three Ways That Churches Get Off-Track

One doesn’t have to read very far in 1 Timothy to get a clear understanding as to why Paul wrote this Pastoral Epistle. Timothy was sent there on a pastoral mission due to some serious problems that were developing. This week and next we’ll be looking at the central problems that he was attempting to address.

Paul was concerned that the church in Ephesus not get “off-track.” He had seen too many church-train wrecks, and it was his earnest desire for that **not** to happen in Ephesus. In fact, Paul warned the Elders about the potential for future problems in Acts 20:28 –

28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30).

Paul seemed to anticipate the challenges that were to come, and it is the first thing that Paul addresses with Timothy. He wastes no time. What we’ll find here is some helpful thoughts from Paul on what Timothy should do, fight, and focus upon. And from these verses we can see three ways that churches get off-track:

1. Bad Leadership (v 3)

Paul’s first instructions to Timothy are directed specifically to what he is personally to do. It seems that Paul and Timothy had a previous conversation about what was transpiring at Ephesus, and Paul reinforces his earlier instructions:

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine... (1 Tim 1:3).

Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus in order to strengthen the churches that had been planted during Paul’s missionary journeys. The city of Ephesus was a strategic location since it was the commercial and religious center of the province of Asia. It was likely populated with 300,000 people. Further, its major claim to fame was Temple of Diana which ranked as one of the Seven Wonders of the World at the time. The temple was supported by 127 columns, each of them 197 feet high. This might explain why Paul calls the church “a pillar and buttress of the truth” in 1 Timothy 3:15.

The cultural significance of this temple appears in Acts 19. Paul remained at Ephesus for three years. During that time Paul saw many converts (19:20), disciplined people who had heard John the Baptist speak (19:3), and barely escaped a riot when a silversmith named Demetrius protested the influence of Paul’s teaching on their business of making figurines of Diana (19:25-26). They were afraid that Paul was going to undercut their religious tourism. The result was a city-wide protest.

The city of Ephesus was strategic and important, and Paul likely used it as an outpost for further church planting. So any major problems in this church would have significant effects on the other churches in the area. Therefore, what the church at Ephesus needed was solid, on-the-ground, in-the-trenches pastoral leadership.

Notice that there are two things that he “urged” Timothy to do in verse three:

First, he urged him to **“remain at Ephesus.”** We are not certain, but it seems likely that Timothy may have asked Paul for another assignment or perhaps he had been there longer than other ministry assignments. Regardless, the point is obvious that Paul wanted him to stay there.

The word “remain” can mean more than just reside or live. It means to live with or to cleave to, and it carries the idea of perseverance and faithful adherence. In 1 Timothy 5:5 the word is used for how older, righteous widows pray: “...she continues in supplications and prayers night and day.” In pastoral ministry, it reflects a personal care for people, their souls, and a faithful perseverance through difficulties. The calling here is for Timothy to patiently endure the challenges of the situation.

Jesus used the illustration of a shepherd versus a hired hand to demonstrate this point in his ministry:

11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd (John 10:11-14).

The first mark of bad leadership is that they run away from problems, from issues, from challenges. Good leaders care for the sheep by laying their lives down which often looks like not leaving them, not giving in, and embracing endurance.

Secondly, he urged him to **“charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine.”** Notice that remaining was not enough. Good pastoral leadership involves the courage to say what needs to be said. The Greek word literally means to announce beside (para-beside; angello – announce). The Gospels tell us that this is what Jesus did with the demons (Luke 8:29) and what he did with his disciples (Matt 10:5). The idea is firm, clear, and authoritative instruction. It is often translated as “charge” or “command.”

Paul shows us the difference here between good and bad church leaders. Timothy was instructed to embrace the God-given authority that he had been given and to take a firm and assertive stance when it came to leading the church. Now, certainly Timothy was not to be rude, quarrelsome, or argumentative (see 1Timothy 3:2-3); however he wasn’t to be spineless either.

How do churches get off-track? By bad leaders who run away from problems or shy away from telling people the truth. From Paul’s instruction to Timothy, we get a clear sense that Paul knew that a failure to remain in the fire-fight or an unwillingness to speak with clarity and truth would have disastrous results.

Culturally, this is really important for us to consider. Let me give you two quotations. John Piper, reflecting on the pastoral ministry of Charles Simeon who for twelve years endured countless attacks from his people, writes:

One of the pervasive marks of our times is emotional fragility. It hangs in the air we breathe. We are easily hurt. We pout and mope easily. We blame easy. We break easy. Our marriages break easy. Our faith breaks easy. Our happiness breaks easy. And our commitment to church breaks easily. We are easily disheartened, and it seems we have little capacity for surviving and thriving in the face of criticism and opposition... We see very few healthy, happy examples today whose lives spell out in flesh and blood the rugged words, "Count it all joy, my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds (James 1:2).¹

Regarding the need for speaking the truth, John Stott said:

Contemporary culture is being overtaken and submerged by the spirit of post-modernism. Post-modernism begins as a self-conscious reaction against the modernism of the Enlightenment, and especially against its unbounded confidence in reason, science and progress. The post-modern mind... declares that there is no such thing as objective or universal truth; that all so-called 'truth' is purely subjective, being culturally conditioned; and that therefore we all have our own truth, which has as much right to respect as anybody else's... everybody has his or her own truth. You have yours, and I have mine... In consequence, the most prized virtue is tolerance. It tolerates everything except the intolerance of those who insist that certain ideas are true and others are false, while certain practices are good and others evil.²

Churches get off track when spiritual leaders run from problems and fail to speak the truth with clarity and conviction.

2. False Teaching (vv 3b-4)

Paul addresses a second issue early in this letter, and it becomes a major focal point for what is written in 1 Timothy. He is concerned about false teaching that is starting to take root in the church. Paul has seen the effects of false teaching in other contexts, and the issue is not just the content of what is being taught. The other problem is ungodliness that the false teaching produces. False teaching is dangerous because it is wrong and because of where it leads.

1 Timothy never completely identifies specifically what the false teaching is. But we can piece together a number of statements to get a big-picture overview, and we also find four characteristics in verses three and four.

The false teaching that is affecting Ephesus could be summarized with the following:

- Unlike the problem in Galatians where the problem came from the outside, this issue seems to have come from the inside of the church (Acts 20:30). This may explain why this

¹ John Piper, The Roots of Endurance – Invincible Perseverance in the lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2002), 79.

² John R. W. Stott, The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 10 & 42.

so much material on the character qualities of leaders and why two men are personally named in chapter one.

- The false teaching produced many destructive effects: arguments, quarrels, pride, divisiveness and greed.
- It found particular appeal with young women in this church setting (2 Tim 3:6-9). Most church issues spread within a particular group or sub-set of the church, and, in this case, Paul particularly addresses what to do with these young women (see also 1 Tim 2:9-15, 5:3-16 – esp. 11-15).

The issue was internal, spiritual and pastoral. This teaching was creating problems within the church, and these issues grew out of the content of the false teaching.

There are four characteristics of this false teaching that are important to note because they help us know what to watch out for:

1. *New*

Paul calls the false teaching a “different doctrine,” and it appears that he may have even made up a word, calling it *heterodidaskaleo*. The word means it is a departure or a deviation from the apostolic instruction that the church had been taught. Now it is important to note here that not everything “new” is bad, but part of the appeal of this false teaching was its improvement on what Paul had taught. Most false teachers do not present their teaching as radically different but merely as an improvement. However, Paul saw this as preaching a different gospel (Gal 1:6) or a different Jesus (2 Cor 11:4).

Therefore, Timothy’s charge was to bring the truth back to the forefront of the church. As many as ten times in the letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul instructs these pastors to refute false doctrine by careful, accurate teaching.³ Guard the truth that leads to life.

2. *Mystical*

The second thing that we see is that there was a focus on myths. He warns Timothy about those who “devote themselves to myths” (v 4). Paul is referring here to historical legends, fables, and Jewish stories that present themselves as alternatives to the truth.⁴

Paul seems to be constantly fighting theological battles on two fronts. In the first case, he is battling a conservative group from Jerusalem who legalistically insisted on the circumcision of the Gentiles in order for them to be considered true believers. This is what the entire book of Galatians is about. Secondly, and more common, was a religious pluralism that blended Christianity with Greek thought and philosophy. In Corinth it was people claiming “higher knowledge.” In Colossae it was a blending of Jewish and Greek beliefs leading to ascetic practices and rituals.

³ Stott, 11.

⁴ Stott, 43.

In Ephesus it appears that these teachers were pointing people to non-authoritative stories or allegories, and the focus of their fancy became these myths.

3. Intellectual

Along with the myths, there was a use of genealogies. This likely was somehow connected to non-biblical books that were designed to be illustrative commentaries on the Old Testament. The Book of Jubilees, Philo's Questions and Answers in Genesis, and the Book of Biblical Antiquities were all in circulation during this time.⁵ A particular feature were the genealogy sections which supplied the names of all of Adam and Eve's children, of Enoch's and Noah's family, and of the seventy people who originally traveled to Egypt.⁶ No doubt it took special knowledge to understand and discern these facts and ideas.

4. Confusion

The final characteristic is what this false teaching produced. This is the main reason why Paul is so concerned about it. Not only was it wrong; but it produced some very unhelpful things in the body of Christ. Paul calls the genealogies "endless," and he says that this teaching leads "speculations." The word means philosophical investigation, debate, disputes and endless questioning. The result of this is twofold: 1) meaningless talk (1:6) and 2) quarrels and strife –

3 If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, 4 he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, 5 and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth... (1 Tim 6:3-5).

As you can see this false teaching was deeply concerning to Paul, especially since it was coming from people within the church. Timothy had a tall order here: to confront church members, groups and leaders who had bought into false teaching that was creating many problems.

So how does a church get off track? Not considering carefully what is being taught and by not taking the truth seriously enough. At the same time, a church can also get off-track by being so stuck in old forms and methods that are treated as if they are essentials. Legalism and liberalism are two extremes that the church must always guard against. Legalism is taking a preference, method or program and making it central (e.g., real Christians use the ESV). Liberalism is taking a fundamental of the faith (e.g., the death of Jesus) and making it a negotiable preference.

Churches go off-track when there is no clear teaching that helps people understand the difference between the theological center and the circumference.

⁵ Gordon Fee, The New International Biblical Commentary – 1-2 Timothy, Titus, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 41-42.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 10

3. Wrong Focus (vv 4b-5)

The final way that churches get off-track is by having the wrong focus. I've already alluded to this in the difference between the center and the circumference, but it is important that you see this at another level.

After identifying the problem of the false teaching, Paul highlights what should be their focus. The problem in Ephesus was that church had drifted from the center. Namely, they had begun to neglect the centrality of two things: 1) the gospel and 2) love.

These two elements are essential for any church and neglecting either of them leads to a church getting seriously off-track.

We see the gospel identified in two places in verses 4-5. The first reference is the statement "the stewardship from God that is by faith." At first this might not seem to refer to the gospel but it certainly does. The word "stewardship" can also be translated as work, and it can refer to the management of another's household.⁷ In this context it fits well with the idea that God has entrusted to the church his message and mission. The "work of God" is the accomplishment of his plan of redemption, the delivery of the message that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That is why the ESV translates it as stewardship. It is the work of God (NIV), and it is a sacred trust.

We see this stewardship is activated or received "by faith." This is the great contrast between true and false teaching, a dichotomy between faith and works. Whenever the gospel is compromised, it happens in some way with works. The gospel rightly understood will always result in a greater dependency on God and a greater embracing of humility.

Finally, we see the gospel in the final string of thoughts in verse 5: "...a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith." I've already mentioned the faith aspect. What about the heart and conscience? The terms are probably synonyms capturing what the gospel has brought about. Namely, that through faith in Jesus a person is cleansed of his or her sin. Therefore, the heart is now pure and the conscience is now free of guilt. The person has found that the gospel brings freedom, forgiveness, cleansing, redemption, and wholeness. The false teachers were apparently not focusing on the fullness of the gospel and what it meant for life and godliness.

However, the gospel is not all that Paul mentions here. He also talks about the effect of the gospel in how love is shown. He says, "The aim of our charge is love..." Timothy's charge is not just to teach the people the truth, but to teach the people truth that leads to love. This is the life of any church. When the truth is properly guarded, it will lead to love in the body. A well-taught, gospel-centered, Jesus-focused church will overflow with love for one another. But hear me! We don't need sermons on love alone! We need sermons on the gospel! That is what leads to love. We need to be reminded about our pure hearts, our good consciences, and our sincere faith, realizing

⁷ Fee, 42.

that without Jesus we'd have none of it. And when this is fully understood, love is as natural and normal as trees blooming in the spring.

Churches get off track when, in the name of love, they decrease the emphasis on the gospel. They get off-track when they make the ministry about people and their needs rather than about God and his need to see sin dealt with. Churches get off track when they do good for good sake rather than good for gospel sake. Churches get off track when they make unity the **root** of the gospel ("we are ONE church") rather than the **fruit** of the gospel ("we are ONE in Christ!").

But churches also get off-track when they think that teaching the truth is more important than living the truth. They get off-track when it's more important who you've read and who you can quote than who you've loved. Churches get off-track when Bible studies are filled and nursery-rosters are empty, when books are sold but lawns are not mowed, when money is given to reach the nations but the widow and orphan in your own community are neglected.

Is the gospel more important than love? Sure it is. But does it work without love? No. "The aim of our charge is love!"

So how do churches get off-track? Through bad leaders who run from problems and won't speak the truth, through false teaching that makes no distinction between the center and the circumference, and through a wrong focus that neglects the gospel and love.

A Final Charge

Churches must guard against this happening. But so must any gathering of believers. Small groups get off-track with bad leaders, false teaching or the wrong focus. Children's ministry can get off track; Sunday School Classes can get off-track. Counseling can get off-track. And, at the most basic level, families with bad leaders, false teaching (the absence of true teaching), or the wrong focus can also get off-track.

So College Park, guard the truth that leads to life in every arena of your life!

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