

Sound faith

Today begins a four-lesson study based on 1 Timothy, examining the primary areas of ministerial leadership. But this study is not about designing



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a job description for pastors. This is a reminder that the “work” of ministry involves all the members of the church, striving together to serve God, equip all believers for ministry and teach a sound faith foundation.

In the earliest days of the church the distinctions between ordained and laity were not as distinct as today. My mind is crowded with memories of numerous laypeople who have ministered creatively and effectively. Joe, my current Sunday School teacher, does an outstanding job of teaching God’s Word and encouraging me every Sunday. Romona, a retired school teacher, has created and directs a ministry for women whose circumstances have left them alone on the street, facing despair as well as danger every day.

1 Timothy and Titus are Paul’s other two pastoral letters. Although scholars debate the actual authorship of these three letters, we know they were circulated among the early churches, copied and recopied because they are both sound and practical. This letter was originally written for the church in Ephesus or perhaps several churches in that area (v. 5). The conclusion of all three pastoral letters indicates they were to be shared with the whole congregation. The “you” in the closings is plural.

Timothy, a trusted co-laborer in Paul’s missionary travels, appears in Acts as well as in several of Paul’s letters. We learn from 2 Timothy that his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, were Jewish followers of Christ who nurtured Timothy in faith. Their Greek names hint that they most likely were members of a Jewish family that had lived for years outside Palestine. Timothy’s father may have been a Gentile, but he is not identified. There were many Jewish families who had settled in cities around the empire, flourishing in business and even marrying into Gentile families.

In Acts 16, a young Timothy appears

in a controversy over his joining Paul on a missionary journey because Timothy was not circumcised (another hint his father was not Jewish). The early clash over doctrinal differences in the early church probably helped the young man prepare for the conflicts he would later face. God wastes nothing in our experiences, but we must pay attention. We read about Timothy in Berea (Acts 17), when he preceded Paul to Macedonia (Acts 19), again at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians) and when he ministered to the church at Corinth (Acts 18 and 1 Corinthians 16).

Paul asked Timothy to confront false teachings in Ephesus. He specifies “myths and endless genealogies” that cause “useless guessing games instead of faithfulness to God’s way of doing things” (v. 4).

“Myths” may refer to stories about the Greek and Roman gods and various pagan philosophies. As in that day, there still occur in our time some strange mingling of pagan or superstitious ideas with Christian doctrines which confuses those not soundly grounded in the truth. A woman once told me that faeries are also God’s angels!

“Genealogies” probably means symbolic or imaginative interpretations of family lines found in Old Testament books. Someone suggested to me that the lineage and properties established for the twelve tribes of Israel and the actual family trees could provide the key to a Second Coming chronology! We always get into trouble when we try to turn factual biblical stories into parables or riddles with secret meanings or when we ignore the totality of Scripture, context, social setting and historical facts. We must be careful to stay with the prologue of John’s gospel which states Jesus is the Word...he is God...and no book or written words can displace Jesus Christ in our heart or mind (John 1:1-5).

The kind of teaching the church needs concerns “faithfulness to God’s way of doing things” (v. 4, CEB) The goal of teaching and learning sound doctrine is to shape how we live, to present the truth of God in our perspective, values and living. Paul says it so beautifully: “The goal of instruction is love from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith” (v. 5).

Formations

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Scripture: 1 Timothy 1:1-9

Some of the conflict may have come from those who kept insisting that while faith in Christ is essential, to be truly spiritual you must continue to keep the Law, or parts of it. Paul reminds us the Law serves a purpose, not to earn us points with God, but to point out our need for God’s gift of salvation in Christ (vv. 7-9) and Galatians 3:23-29). Note that Paul is being very careful that he does not add to the tension between Jewish and Gentile converts as he reminds them “the Law is good if used appropriately” (v. 8) while pointing to Christ as God’s way of salvation.

Failure to study the Bible, using sound resources and avoiding extreme or “new” spiritual ideas is essential to sound faith. Paul learned from the earliest disciples and studied for three years before he began his formal ministry, then he began to teach others like Timothy, and Timothy carried on the ministry of teaching sound doctrine so the church would not be lost to false teachers and ideas.

In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul warns about a time when people “will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, and will turn away from the truth, and will turn away to myths” (NASV). Before we seek to teach others, let’s be sure we have studied carefully and deepened in our own spiritual life.

Sound teaching begins in our love for Christ, a dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide and illuminate, and a desire to help others experience the riches of God’s grace. Ego and dogmatism are not marks of a teaching ministry that honors God and builds up the church.

Timothy carried a heavy responsibility, but he had the example of Paul’s compassionate heart, hunger for truth and commitment to study. We must all be discerning and faithful to the abundant truths recorded in God’s written word, with our hearts centered on Christ.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.