

THE NON-NEGOTIABLE CENTRALITY OF GOSPEL DOCTRINE (1 Timothy 1) “Teach no other doctrine” (1 Tim 1.3)

Churches today are suffering spiritually, both because of *false* doctrine and because of *other* doctrine, that is, ideas and activities which are far removed from God’s revealed will. So much of what we hear from modern Christian ministries is not necessarily wrong in itself, but a distraction from the core of the apostolic message, and to the degree it diverts us from the most important truths, it really is “contrary to sound doctrine” (1.10). Ironically, in the name of *relevance*, Christian pulpits and presses and media spew forth many things completely *irrelevant* to the nature of God and man, the plight of sinners without Christ, and the way of salvation through Him. *Doctrine itself* is generally despised, and an appreciation for *accurate* gospel doctrine is rare. Weak and sickly churches glory in having no doctrinal statement and being nondenominational, or having one vague enough for every professing Christian to agree. This is not fringe evangelicalism, but its impoverished mainstream.

We desperately need to hear afresh God’s counsel in 1 Timothy, with earnest desires to understand it and resolve to embrace it wholeheartedly, putting it into practice. The theme I discern in chapter one is “the non-negotiable centrality of gospel doctrine,” and the teaching might be summarized this way:

Together, we absolutely must fight uncompromisingly to maintain a steady focus upon gospel doctrine in and from the church.

I say, **together, we**, because this epistolary charge is for the whole body of Christ, not just individuals; **absolutely**, because this is a charge with no qualification, restriction, or limitation;¹ **must fight uncompromisingly**, referring to spiritual warfare which refuses to negotiate any truce with the enemy for the sake of ease; **to maintain**, because I assume we are already engaged in this task; **a steady focus**, because our natural tendency is to drift from biblical priorities; **upon gospel doctrine**, that is, teaching which centers upon the person and work of Jesus Christ and our salvation in Him to God’s glory, or *evangelical theology*; **in and from the church**, because first believers must be constantly learning and growing in this gospel doctrine, and then we must announce it, formally and informally, to those on the outside. Our exposition will demonstrate that this accurately represents the heart of 1 Timothy 1.

¹ NOAD.

GOSPEL DOCTRINE ESTABLISHES CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP (1.1-2)

A biblical church is a fellowship of Christians, and the core of what holds us all together, despite many differences superficial in comparison, is the person and work of Jesus Christ or gospel doctrine. The first local church at Jerusalem is thus characterized by Luke: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (Acts 2.42), linking these two. The “apostles’ doctrine” is the teaching that distinguished their message from others, and any study of the apostolic gospels and epistles and apocalypse, indeed, of their preaching focus seen throughout the whole book of Acts, our inspired church history, reveals that it centered upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul testified of the apostles’ doctrine this way, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1.23), and “I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor 2.2).

All the Jerusalem church members, in distinction from what they once thought and what non-members continued to think, really now believed this apostles’ doctrine, and the result of such evangelical faith was fellowship (Gk. *koinonia*), literally, “having in common,”² and by extension, “close mutual association,”³ “the living bond that unites Christians [which] begins as fellowship with the Father and the Son by an abiding that commences here and is fulfilled hereafter . . . [and] issues in the family fellowship of believers.”⁴ This is an invisible, living, spiritual reality, with its most tangible expression in authentic local churches of Jesus Christ. Without gospel doctrine there is no fellowship and no church, even if the shell of what used to be a true church remains intact.

Paul’s opening greeting in 1 Timothy reflects this. In its basic form it follows the cultural norms for letters in those days: [sender], to [recipient], greetings. But Paul redeems this form by filling it with distinctively evangelical sentiments.

1.1. The sender is “Paul,” using his Christian name, who was formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee. “Apostle” is his office in the gospel ministry which he received personally from “God [the Father] and [the] Lord Jesus Christ.” Calling God our Savior and Christ our hope is overtly gospel-related, for the gospel is all about spiritual salvation and hope for the future.

² Vine’s Expository Dictionary.

³ Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains.

⁴ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (abridged).

1.2. The recipient is “Timothy,” related to Paul not by blood but in gospel fellowship, “my own son in the faith,” that is, that body of truth which is gospel doctrine. “Grace, mercy, and peace” is a distinctively Christian greeting. The customary Jewish expression was merely “shalom” (peace), and “grace” used this way was unknown apart from gospel doctrine. The source of these spiritual blessings is “God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord,” only known to us in the gospel.

Paul is implying that it is the gospel message itself, the glorious good news about what God has done in Christ to save sinners and is now doing by the application of that finished redemption to His elect, that is the basis of Christian fellowship—not ten thousand other things which many professing Christians loudly champion and commonly use as litmus tests for fellowship.

GOSPEL DOCTRINE HAS BEEN LOST BY SOME IN THE CHURCH (1.3-4)

1.3. Paul’s concern is not theoretical; he is aware that some are already leading the churches away from this gospel doctrine, particularly in Ephesus, and that is why he exhorted before, and is urging Timothy now, to remain there for the time being. He is to act as Paul’s spokesman, and more importantly, to speak in the name of Jesus Christ the church’s only Head, “charging” these troublemakers. The Greek verb means literally, “to announce beside,” and figuratively, “to hand on an announcement from one to another.”⁵ It is one of four NT synonyms for the basic idea of *command*, and this one has the particular connotation of the order of a military commander to his troops.⁶ “Some” within the church are acting according to their own wishes, and not carrying out the orders of the Lord Jesus. Specifically, they are teaching “other doctrine” (Gk. *heterodidaskaleo*), referring to any message substituted for apostolic gospel doctrine (also used in 1 Tim 6.3, “teach otherwise,” i.e., other than the truth Paul taught; cf. 1 Tim 6.2, “these things teach”).

Listen, my brethren. The church is in spiritual danger when *any message* replaces gospel doctrine, *even biblical material* that is not handled in an evangelical way, as Paul is about to explain. Apostasy begins when we are more interested in *anything* besides the gospel.

1.4. These wicked men on Paul’s mind were obsessed with “fables and endless genealogies;” they have power of perpetual fascination with some people. Right away some readers want to know all about the specific nature of this things, and this illustrates the

reason Paul is concerned. These myths “minister [lit., bring] questions” (or, “promote speculations,” ESV) “rather than” (i.e., instead of) “godly edifying which is in faith.” The teachers of “other doctrines” besides the gospel also produce other effects besides sanctification, namely, curiosity and debates. This is no small thing; the perpetrators are pernicious (cf. 1 Tim 6.3-5).

GOSPEL DOCTRINE IS THE END OF THE LAW (1.5-11)

1:8. The evil teachers had something more plausibly biblical to say than these myths and genealogies. They also taught about what we might fairly call “the moral law” of the OT. Paul does not object to their raising the topic, but rather to the way they handled it. Ironically, they did not use the good *law lawfully*, that is, the right way (wordplay here).

The Law’s Redemptive Purpose in Believers (1.5-7)

1.5. The word “end” here is used in the sense of goal or aim,⁷ and the word “commandment” (“charge,” ESV) is the noun form of the verb in 1.3. Therefore it probably refers to that charge rather than the moral law, with the sense, “the point of my charging you to prohibit other doctrine is to promote love from a pure heart and from a good conscience and from sincere faith,” but this aim of the gospel charge is also the aim of the moral law with respect to Christian believers (cf. Rom 13.8-10). For us it is a rule of life, a standard of evangelical righteousness. This observation is wholly justifiable because the immediate context shows that the moral law is not far from Paul’s mind as he writes.

1.6-7. The bad teachers not only omitted the gospel, but they also handled the law badly, since they had “swerved” (lit., “missed the mark”⁸) and “turned aside unto vain jangling,” that is, useless talk.⁹ They wanted to be law-teachers (one word in Greek), but they were ignorant and self-confident—a combination making them incorrigible.

The Law’s Redemptive Purpose in Unbelievers (1.8-11)

1.9a. They also failed to use the law aright with respect to unbelievers. By saying “the law is not made for a righteous man,” Paul is not denying the usefulness of the law for believers, but rather he sets forth its main purpose for the unconverted, namely, to convict of sin and of the need for the Savior Jesus Christ, the Just One who kept the law perfectly and suffered its curse for people justly condemned by the law.

1.9b-10. This second part of this list (1.9c-10) very obviously follows the last part of the Decalogue.

⁵ Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, “charge.”

⁶ Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon, #5844.

⁷ TDNT.

⁸ Vine’s.

⁹ Wuest’s Word Studies in the Greek New Testament.

- 5C, dishonoring parents: “murders of fathers and murderers of mothers.”
- 6C, unlawful killing: “manslayers” (“murderers,” ESV).
- 7C, adultery: “whoremongers, them that defile themselves with mankind” (“sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality,” ESV).
- 8C, stealing: “menstealers” (“enslavers,” ESV).
- 9C, bearing false witness: “liars, perjured persons.”
- 10C, covetousness: included in the expression, “anything else that is contrary to sound doctrine.”

What is not so obvious is a correlation of the first part of the list (1.9b) with the first four of the Ten Commandments, but this has been plausibly demonstrated.¹⁰ The first phrase, “the lawless and disobedient,” is a general description of those who fail to keep God’s commandments, either living without the law or in flagrant violation of its prohibitions and injunctions. After that we have four terms for the first four commandments. “Ungodly” is a description of those who break 1C, abandoning God as the only true God. “Sinners” is a term particularly suited to 2C, worshiping idols. “Unholy” corresponds to 3C, taking the Lord’s name in vain. “Profane” has in mind 4C, Sabbath desecration.

These are the very sins that have made unbelievers horribly guilty before God, and the law is rightly used to expose a sinner’s bondage and doom without Christ, and to whet the appetite for gospel doctrine.

1.11. This way of handling the law is totally “in accordance with” the gospel, and therefore it is “sound doctrine” (1.10). See how Paul views gospel doctrine as a standard for teaching and ministry! He had a conscience-gripping conscientiousness of his evangelical stewardship, and he was promoting that same gospel-centered sensitivity in all his readers.

GOSPEL DOCTRINE IS ILLUSTRATED IN PAUL’S LIFE AND MINISTRY (1.12-16)

For Paul, gospel doctrine was very personal, because it transformed him, giving him a reason to live in the here and now and a well-founded assurance about his blessed eternity.

1.12. He cannot mention this without a word of thanksgiving to the Savior. Christ has full credit from Paul for his current position and the radical change he had experienced, and he notes three particulars.

1) “He” (i.e., “Christ Jesus our Lord”) “hath enabled [strengthened] me” spiritually and ministerially (2 Cor 3.5-6; Phil 4.13; 2 Tim 4.17).

2) “He counted me faithful,” not as Saul the Pharisee, but as one now enabled by the grace of Christ. Paul stands amazed that Christ would entrust him of all people, considering his past, with the gospel message (cf. 1.11).

3) He “put me into the ministry” [appointed me to service], that is, a ministry of gospel doctrine to those desperately in need of it, both inside and outside the church. From the first, Jesus described Paul’s calling as “bearing My name before” all kinds of sinners (Acts 9.15). Paul thoroughly understood that he was given grace for the purpose of “preaching among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph 3.8). He summarized “the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, [as a responsibility] to testify the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20.24). This was a “ministry of reconciliation” between God and sinners (2 Cor 5.18-20). The last words in Luke’s account are of the aged Paul “preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus, with all confidence, no man forbidding him” (Acts 28.30-31).

1.13. The wonder of all this, and the words he had just written about the law convicting sinners, remind him of his own life before Christ. Saul the Pharisee was a “blasphemer” (one who defamed God, opposing gospel doctrine), a “persecutor” (one who chased others down to punish them for believing gospel doctrine), and “injurious” (more strictly, “insolent,” insultingly contemptuous, implying that he mistreated others on account of their embracing gospel doctrine). Saul was unwittingly breaking the very moral law he aimed to teach, just like these he now censures, and he had committed all these sins against Jesus, who counted everything done to His beloved people as done to Himself (Acts 9.4-5).

“But” signals the great spiritual change, and the cause of it was Christ’s “showing mercy” to wretched Saul (passive voice, “I was *shown* mercy,” stressing this as the act of Another). God kept Saul from committing the unpardonable sin which has no forgiveness, for in his sins he acted “ignorantly in unbelief,” leaving him a candidate for salvation.

1.14. That explains why Paul attributes his salvation to “the grace [undeserved favor] of our Lord” and characterizes it as “exceeding abundant” (lit., “superabounded;” also, “overflowing”). It was this gracious Lord who gave Paul the spiritual gospel-faith and gospel-love he now possessed.

¹⁰ Richard Barcellos, “First Timothy 1:8-11 and the Utility of the Decalogue,” RBTR I.1, January 2004.

1.15. We would be hard-pressed to find gospel doctrine stated more succinctly anywhere than in this “faithful saying,” namely, that “Christ Jesus came into the world *sinners* to save,” (Gk. word order), sinners of whom Paul was, by nature and by former life, the “chief,” “foremost,” “greatest” or “most prominent” (the Gk. allows all these senses).

1.16. Another reason Christ showed Paul saving mercy was to make an example of him to other great sinners, giving them hope for salvation. He who was foremost in sin was to become the foremost in grace, “Exhibit A” of the greatness of Christ’s saving grace and the length of His perfect patience, according to this gospel doctrine upon which we and our churches should be centered.

GOSPEL DOCTRINE PROMOTES GOD’S GLORY (1.17)

Thinking about the gospel in general is enough to excite any saint to praise, but to meditate on our own experience of gospel grace makes praise positively irrepressible, so Paul breaks out with much feeling in high and formal doxology.

1.17. Ascribing “honor and glory forever and ever” to God is the basic form of this doxology, but Paul piles on more words to magnify God’s glory. He is “the King,” absolutely sovereign, “eternal” as His status can never change, “immortal” because He is not subject to death or decay, “invisible” unlike earthly kings who can be attacked and overthrown, “the only wise God,” whose plans and ways are perfect and need no correction.

Nothing stimulates such worship from God’s people more than gospel doctrine, and nowhere are God’s glorious attributes more obviously on display than in the gospel. Since the church is to be glorifying God in our worship, we must maintain a focus on gospel doctrine.

MAINTAINING THE CENTRALITY OF GOSPEL DOCTRINE REQUIRES CONFRONTATION (1.18-20)

This chapter concludes with Paul’s charge to Timothy. This is a command, an order, a directive, instruction, or what we call “application.” Gospel indicatives mandate gospel imperatives, and here the duty is confrontation of the hostile. Paul is requiring such a difficult thing that he offers several great incentives for Timothy to have manly courage.

1.18. First, this charge was “committed” or “entrusted” to “son Timothy” by Paul. The language means that Paul was a spiritual mentor to Timothy, but it is more tender and intimate, a term of endearment. No one had a comparable claim to Timothy’s loyalty, and Paul would have been personally distraught if his “son” had not carried out the charge.

Second, there were “the prophecies which went before” Timothy at his ordination to the gospel ministry, where men full of the Holy Spirit, laying hands on the young man, had offered inspired utterances of his future usefulness in the churches (1 Tim 4.14). Remembering these would help him “war a good warfare” (the Greek verses and noun are the same cognate; “fight the good fight,” NET; paraphrase: “fight like a good soldier”).

While today we do not have such direct word-revelations about us personally, we do have God’s promises in Scripture that as we give ourselves to the same gospel task, we will have the same gospel grace to carry it out (e.g., Matt 28.19-20). Notice also that gospel ministry is spiritual warfare against God’s enemies. It necessarily provokes the opposition of Satan and wicked men (cf. 2 Tim 3.12). Our part is to act like men, enter the fray, and stay in it. The church loses ground spiritually when it follows people-pleasing cowards.

1.19. Third, the alternative to keeping this charge was positively disastrous, as illustrated by some who did not keep a good conscience (especially with respect to this holy charge). Concerning faith they made shipwreck, perhaps a change of metaphor from army to navy. This highlights the ruinous end of apostates.

1.20. Fourth, Paul set an inspiring example for Timothy of evangelical courage. Paul was like a general in this gospel army, and he, too, was engaged in the struggle. In God’s providence, Paul had just lately had a situation with two supposed ministers in the church whom he names. They proved false to their charge, engaging in some form of blasphemy, and so Paul imposed discipline on them, here described as delivering them to Satan for their reformation. This is the ugly, distressing reality of being faithful to the gospel charge, but it is the life that all real men of God have taken up.

O Timothy! I entrust this holy warfare to you. God will surely help you prevail. Surrender is not an option. Follow my principled example, and you cannot fail.

Together, we absolutely must fight uncompromisingly to maintain a steady focus upon gospel doctrine in and from the church. This is non-negotiable, and it was not just Timothy’s charge, but now it is ours also, as believers, and *especially* as pastors. God help us keep it. Amen.