

Living in God's Church Today

Some Will Depart the Faith

1 Timothy 4:1-5

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Scripture

In his First Letter to Timothy, Paul concluded chapter 3 with a description of the church as “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (3:15) and a summary of that truth in relation to Christ (3:16). Chapter 4 opens with a discussion of false teachers.

Let us read 1 Timothy 4:1-5:

¹ Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:1-5)

Introduction

During these past two years we have all become familiar with the worldwide pandemic known as COVID-19. We were told to wear a face mask, wash hands for 20 seconds, maintain a distance of at least six feet between ourselves and others, avoid large gatherings, and get vaccinated to prevent the spread of the virus. Hopefully, the virus is now waning but we will need to be prepared for the next pandemic.

One of the difficulties with pandemics is that they have been around for centuries. Some well-known pandemics are

known as the Plague of Justinian (541-543), Black Death (1347-1351), First cholera pandemic (1817-1824), Second cholera pandemic (1827-1835), and they go up to the Seventh cholera pandemic (1961-ongoing). Who knows when the next pandemic will make its appearance?

Just as pandemics have come and gone throughout the centuries, so have false teaching, heresy, and apostasy. And just as pandemics have dreadful physical and emotional effects on people, so have false teaching, heresy, and apostasy had dreadful spiritual effects on people.

The apostle Paul was keenly aware of false teaching. He constantly battled it throughout his ministry. In his First Letter to Timothy, Paul warned his young assistant about false teachers. They were troubling the church in Ephesus and Paul wanted Timothy to be on his guard against false teachers.

Lesson

1 Timothy 4:1-5 shows us several features of false teachers.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Certainty of False Teachers (4:1c)
2. The Prediction of False Teachers (4:1a)
3. The Period of False Teachers (4:1b)
4. The Teaching of False Teachers (4:1d-3a)
5. The Correction of False Teachers (4:3b-5)

I. The Certainty of False Teachers (4:1c)

First, notice the certainty of false teachers.

Paul wrote in verse 1c, **“some will depart from the faith.”** Paul was concerned because professing believers were

abandoning Biblical Christianity by embracing false teaching. Paul reported the same problem to the Corinthian church, where he wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:12-15, “And what I am doing I will continue to do, to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.”

There are two kingdoms in this world: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. There is truth and there is error. Satan does not want people to embrace the truth about God and Jesus and salvation. So, he will sow seeds of error. Kent Hughes gives a wonderful illustration of what happens when people move away from the truth. It does not happen all at once but gradually. He writes, “Imagine yourself in a room with walls that are papered bright green. You walk to an adjoining room where the walls are green, but the shade is imperceptibly bluer. You enter a third room, bluer than the second. Again the difference is too small to be noticeable. After passing through fifty rooms, each slightly bluer than the last, someone hands you a sample of the wallpaper in the room where you started. You are astonished by how green it is. Suddenly you realize that the room you are now in is not green at all! It is blue.”¹ That is why it is important to check our understanding always against the inerrant, infallible word of God.

¹ R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 97.

II. The Prediction of False Teachers (4:1a)

Second, look at the prediction of false teachers.

Paul wrote in verse 1a, **“Now the Spirit expressly says** that in later times some will depart from the faith.” We are not told how the Spirit revealed that some will depart the faith. Perhaps the Spirit revealed it in some way to Paul. Nevertheless, Paul was told by the Spirit that some will depart from the faith. To “depart from the faith” refers to an apostasy from the body of Christian truth. Paul was clear in stating that the Spirit had revealed to him that there would be professing believers who would abandon their Christian faith.

One of the results of the COVID-19 pandemic is that initially, almost every church stopped in-person worship services for several months. Then, when churches started to meet in person again, in many instances there were significant restrictions on the number of people who could gather in one space. Over many months, as things “normalized” almost every church noticed that on average 20% of former attendees no longer attended in-person worship. In a minuscule number of cases, this was due to legitimate health concerns. However, in the vast majority of cases, it would seem that many had departed from the faith. Many of these professing believers stopped attending because they were irregular in their worship attendance anyway. Or they were going to worship for the sake of appearance. So, while a drop in worship attendance is discouraging, it could be that those who were never true believers are the ones who have stopped attending worship services.

III. The Period of False Teachers (4:1b)

Third, observe the period of false teachers.

Paul wrote in verse 1b, “Now the Spirit expressly says that **in later times** some will depart from the faith.” What is the time to which Paul was referring? Some may say that this refers to the time just before the return of Jesus. However, Paul gave us a clue about the period of the “**later times**” in this very paragraph. By verse 3, Paul was speaking in the present tense about things that were happening in the Ephesian church at that very moment. This means that the “**later times**” had already begun!

That same shift from the future to the present occurred in Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. Paul warned Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:1 “that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.” He then went on to describe how people would behave in “the last days”: they “will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy,” and so on (3:2ff). Then Paul told Timothy to “avoid such people” (3:5b). In other words, Timothy himself knew some of the wicked people of “the last days.” They were already living in Ephesus at that time.

So, are we living in the last days? The answer is always “Yes!” These are the **later times**. These are the last days. These are the end times. As Philip Ryken says, “The end times thus encompass the whole Christian era from the resurrection of Jesus Christ to his second coming in power and glory.”²

IV. The Teaching of False Teachers (4:1d-3a)

Fourth, look at the teaching of false teachers.

False teaching had crept into the churches in Ephesus.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Daniel M. Doriani, and Philip Graham Ryken, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 154.

Paul looked beneath the surface appearance and explained to Timothy the spiritual dynamic. He referred to three successive stages. The first stage of the error was *diabolical*, which he explained in verse 1d, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith **by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.**” We recognize that we live in a world where Satan is active. Most of the time, we are not aware of what he is doing. But we must never forget that prior to our salvation we “were dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:1-2).

In verse 2a, Paul noted that the second stage of error was *human*, “**through the insincerity of liars.**” Demons deceive humans, who in turn spread the error. These human false teachers do not themselves believe what they are teaching. It is not as though they were self-deceived and honestly thought that they were promoting what they believed to be true. They simply did not believe the error that they were promoting and causing other people to believe.

In our current cultural situation, people are promoting error as truth. For example, we are told that what is important about a person is his identity and not his biology. So, a man may identify as a woman even though he is a biological male. This error is being pushed fiercely by many in our culture and even liberal churches. In an attempt to make people feel included, they are promoting the error of our culture. The truth is that biology matters. Our identity is tied to our biology. Dr. Al Mohler recently pointed out that with the war in Ukraine, news reporters were concerned to get the facts to people rather than a certain narrative that may not necessarily match the

facts. His point was that reporters were being selective in what they were reporting as truth.

The third stage was *moral*, as Paul went on to say in verse 2b, **“whose consciences are seared.”** The Greek word for “seared” (*kausteriazomai*) occurs only here in the New Testament and it means “to be or become unfeeling, unresponsive, or callous (to something); conceived of as being burned or seared.” It seems that Paul was using the word in the medical sense of “cauterizing,” when skin, a nerve, or a superficial tumor is cauterized by burning to render it insensitive. The consciences of false teachers have been deadened and rendered insensitive to the truth. Thus error had no problem making its way into their thinking and teaching.

I once heard Dr. Robert Godfrey say at a Minister’s Conference that no denomination has remained faithful to the gospel for more than two hundred years. That was stunning to me. But I cannot think of a denomination that has remained faithful to the gospel for more than two hundred years. The denomination may start well but eventually, it drifts into error and false teaching. It does so through false teachers whose consciences are seared and deadened to the truth of God’s word.

Paul then went to state clearly what was the teaching of the false teachers. He wrote in verse 3a, **“who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods.”** There were two particular emphases of the false teachers. First, the false teachers forbade marriage. Perhaps they thought that marriage was inherently wrong. Or perhaps they took Jesus’ teaching that there would be no marriage in heaven to be applied now on earth. Paul did not specify the reason for the false teaching that marriage was to be forbidden.

The second emphasis of the false teachers is that they forbade abstinence from certain foods. Again, Paul did not specify

which foods were forbidden by the false teachers.

Forbidding marriage and abstinence from food is a form of *asceticism*. Asceticism is defined as “the doctrine that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing self-denial, self-mortification, and the like.” The Roman Catholic Church forbids marriage to its clergy. They also require abstinence from meat on Fridays for faithful church members. While fasting is appropriate on occasions, it should never become a standard requirement for church members.

V. The Correction of False Teachers (4:3b-5)

And finally, observe the correction of false teachers.

Paul’s correction to the false teachers who forbade marriage and abstinence from foods began in verses 3b-4, where he said that **“God created [these things] to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”** Paul insisted that none of God’s good gifts are off-limits to people since they come from God himself. Moreover, they are to be enjoyed when people recognize their divine origin and give thanks to God who is the giver of the gift.

One of the early lessons that parents pass on to their children is the importance of gratitude. I may give my grandchildren gifts for their birthdays, and their parents will gently remind them, “What do you say?” They want to teach their children to thank me as the giver of the gift for what they had just received. They want their children to recognize the source of the gift and to give thanks to me for that gift. Similarly, as adults, we need to recognize that marriage (between one man and one woman) is a gift from God that is to be enjoyed. And

since God created all kinds of food, we may enjoy all kinds of food as well since it comes from him for our benefit and blessing.

Nothing that is received with thanksgiving is to be rejected **“for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer”** (4:5). The Greek word for **“holy”** (*hagiazō*) carries the idea of “being set aside by God for God.” Thus, by recognizing that the food was created by God and given for our enjoyment and then by giving thanks to God for it in prayer, the food is therefore good for eating.

It seems to me that there are a growing number of people today who have some kind of food prohibition. I can think of people who say that their diet is vegetarian, vegan, pescatarian, or gluten-free. I am sure that there are many others. However, I don't think that most of the people I know are doing so because of some kind of religious conviction. It is generally because they believe it is healthier for their bodies. And, in a very few instances, it is because a person's body reacts badly to consuming certain foods and so they find that a particular diet keeps them from a bad reaction. For the vast majority of people, however, we have the liberty to eat whatever God has created, provided we receive it with thanksgiving and prayer.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the topic of false teachers in 1 Timothy 4:1-5, let us reject asceticism and give thanks to God for his good gifts.

We have so much for which to give thanks to God. The great writer, G. K. Chesterton once wrote:

You say grace before meals.

All right.
But I say grace before the play and the opera,
And grace before the concert and pantomime,
And grace before I open a book,
And grace before sketching, painting,
Swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing;
And grace before I dip the pen in the ink.³

John Stott put it this way:

We should determine, then, to recognize and acknowledge, appreciate and celebrate, all the gifts of the Creator: the glory of the heavens and of the earth, of mountain, river and sea, of forest and flowers, of birds, beasts and butterflies, and of the intricate balance of the natural environment; the unique privileges of our humanness (rational, moral, social and spiritual), as we were created in God's image and appointed his stewards; the joys of gender, marriage, sex, children, parenthood and family life, and of our extended family and friends; the rhythm of work and rest, of daily work as a means to cooperate with God and serve the common good, and of the Lord's day when we exchange work for worship; the blessings of peace, freedom, justice and good government, and of food and drink, clothing and shelter; and our human creativity expressed in music, literature, painting, sculpture and drama, and in the skills and strengths displayed in sport.⁴

And, of course, God's supreme gift to us is salvation in Jesus Christ. Let us always give thanks to God for Jesus and our salvation in him. Amen.

³ Quote in John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 115.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 115.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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